

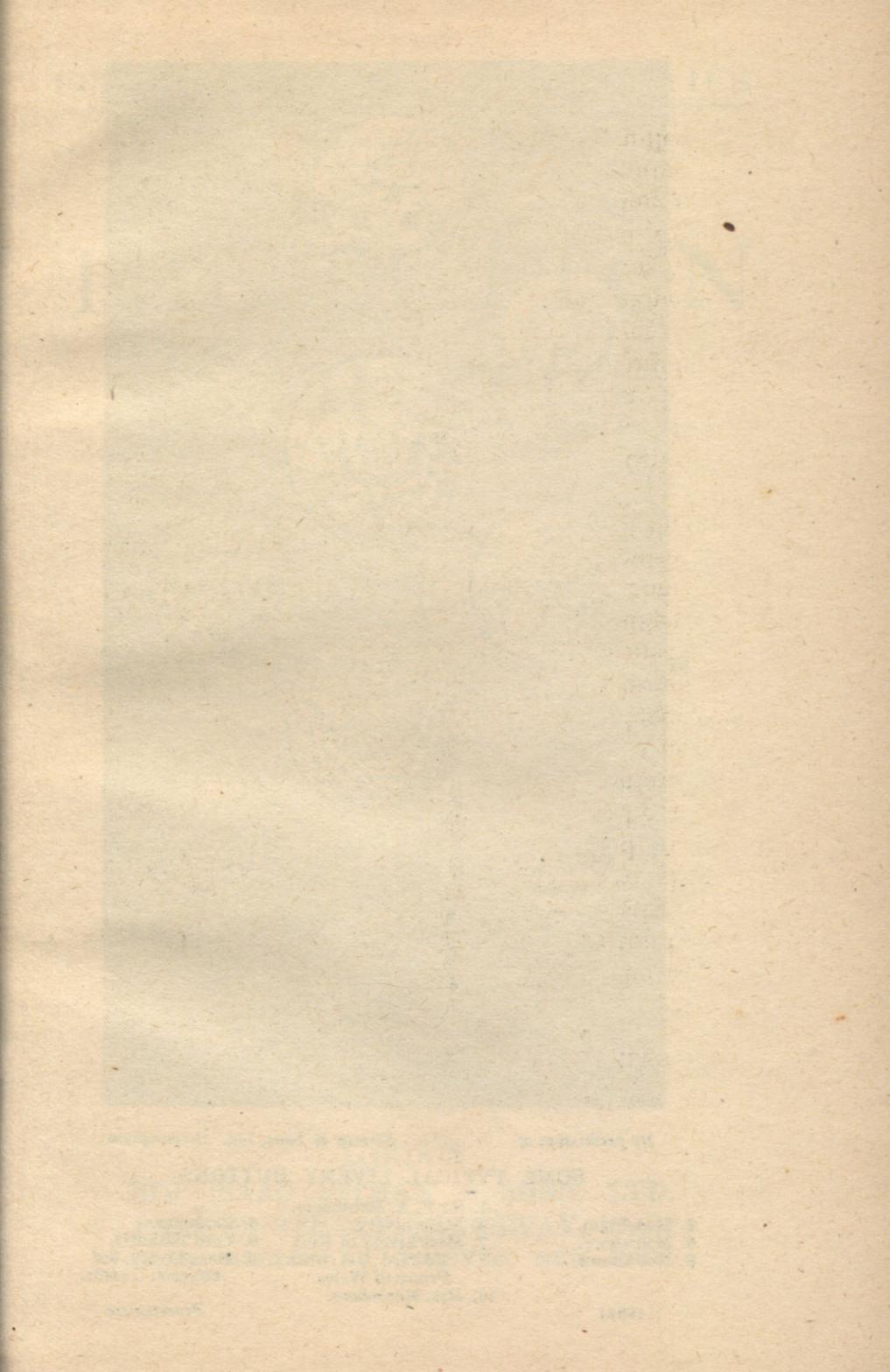
# **The Button Industry**

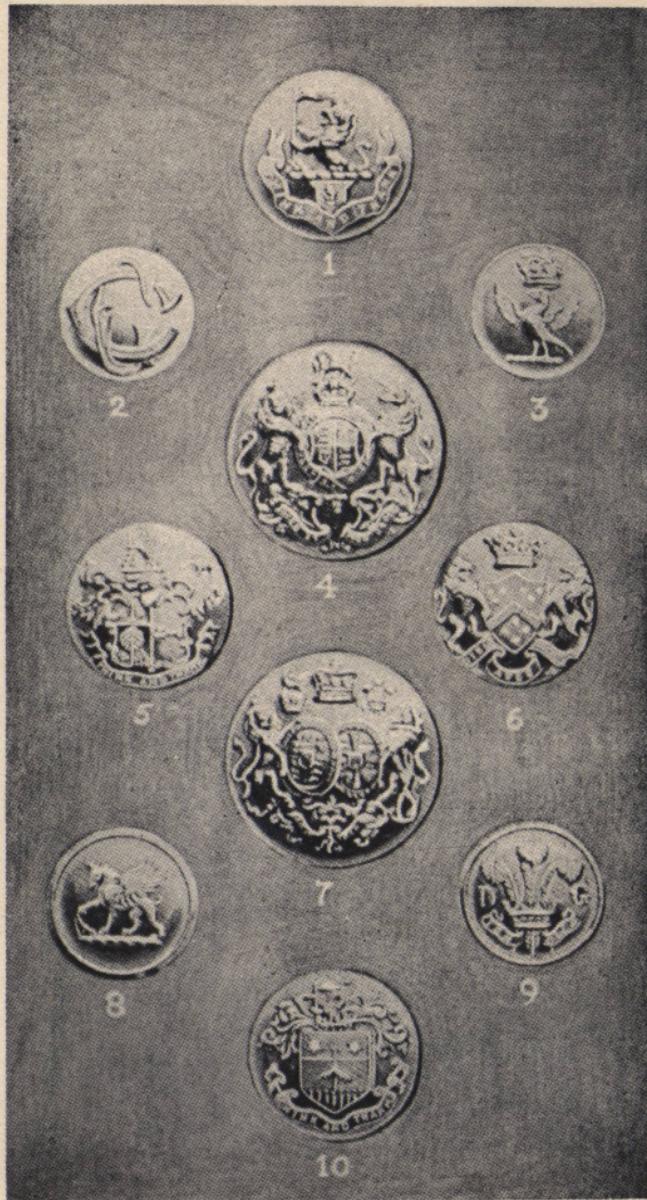
**W. Unite Jones**



# 530  
\$10.-







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**SOME TYPICAL LIVERY BUTTONS**

|                |   |  |
|----------------|---|--|
| 2. Monogram.   | 1. Sir F. A. Montefiore.                                      | 3. Farquhar.                           |
| 5. Montefiore. | 4. State Livery.  | 6. Lord Bathurst.                      |
| 8. Not known.  | 7. Mess Livery of King<br>Edward VII when<br>Prince of Wales. | 9. Mess Livery, 3rd<br>Dragoon Guards. |
|                | 10. Mrs. Montefiore.  |  |

PITMAN'S COMMON COMMODITIES  
AND INDUSTRIES

# THE BUTTON INDUSTRY

BY

W. UNITE JONES

HON. SEC. BIRMINGHAM BUSINESS CLUB  
EDITOR "IRONMONGERS' WEEKLY"; EDITOR "THE  
BUSINESS MAN"; EDITOR "ROTARIA"



LONDON

SIR ISAAC PITMAN & SONS, LTD.  
PARKER STREET, KINGSWAY, W.C.2  
BATH, MELBOURNE, TORONTO, NEW YORK

Dear Friends:

I am glad to be able to present this little book to you as a valuable addition to your library of button knowledge.

For several years I have tried to locate the author, W. Unite Jones, or some knowledge about him, but was unsuccessful until early in 1946. Then I learned of his death on December 13, 1941, and that he was cremated at Lodge Hill Crematorium, Birmingham, December 19. He left a widow, Mrs. Amy Jones and two daughters, Miss Elizabeth Ruth Unite Jones and Miss Amy Frances Unite Jones.

The family of the late Mr. Jones have very graciously consented to the reprinting of his book, "The Button Industry in this Country."

The late Mr. William Unite Jones was born on June 3, 1864 at Manor Farm, Green Lane, Small Heath, Birmingham. He became a well-known Birmingham journalist commencing at the age of 18. He held many posts of distinction during his life time in the writing field. He served as Chief Reporter of the Birmingham Mail and later as a representative on the Birmingham Post. Although during the last 30 years of his life he was working on his own account as correspondent of many trade and national papers in England.

He was commissioned in 1924 by Sir Isaac Pittman & Sons, Limited, of London to write this book on the Birmingham Button Industry. It went out of print in November 1933. Although Mr. Jones was not connected with the Button Industry he was the son of the manager of an old established Birmingham button making firm, known as Jennens, Limited. This would account for his knowledge and ability to write about the subject of buttons.

I am also fortunate in being able, through the late Mr. Jones' family to present his picture.

E. Fuoss



PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN  
AT THE PITMAN PRESS, BATH

## PREFACE

THIS is apparently the first attempt that has been made to write a history of the Button trade, and, although the material has scarcely been scanty, it was widely scattered. Various fugitive articles concerning buttons, their uses, and the methods of their production, have appeared, but no history of the button has hitherto been written.

A book devoted to military buttons has been issued by an American enthusiast, who collected buttons as one might collect stamps ; but the volume is practically a series of full-page illustrations, and mainly concerns military buttons.

The author would like to acknowledge the kind assistance afforded by Messrs. Buttons, Ltd., Hammond, Turner & Sons, Ltd., Firmin & Sons, Ltd., Jennens & Co., Banks & Hammond, Ltd., and Accles & Shelvoke, Ltd. These good helpers have made it possible to deal—adequately, one hopes—with a peculiarly interesting subject, while their illustrations, most readily supplied, have given attractiveness to the pages.

BIRMINGHAM, 1924.

## JOAQUIN

when first in 1945 reported that the experimental  
dormouse was about 1000 and 10000 individuals  
when last seen. When said dormouse was first  
seen and unconfirmed reports were made, it was  
said, dormouse used to abound but now were only  
occasional visitors to the woods on the slopes.

After the first  
heavy rain and continued visitation of beavers down  
the stream, the number of dormice were  
estimated at 10000 and 100000 individuals.  
Accurate figures have not yet been made to verify  
the number of dormice.

Continued visitation  
and the establishment of new burrows will  
probably bring about a marked increase in numbers  
of dormice. In 1945, the number of dormice  
was estimated to be 100000 and 1000000 individuals.  
The number of dormice is changing rapidly now, and  
subsequent visitation is now being made to verify  
the number of dormice. The number of dormice  
is now estimated to be 1000000 and 10000000 individuals.

JOAQUIN

*Printed and Lithoprinted in U.S.A.  
University Lithoprinters, Ypsilanti, Michigan, 1946*

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# THE BUTTON INDUSTRY

## CHAPTER I

### THE FAMILIAR BUTTON

THE button is a common and familiar object, but comparatively little has been written concerning it ; assuredly it cannot be said to have a literature of its own. There is plenty of fugitive information, but apparently the button has not been a source of inspiration to many writers, and, although references to the subject are multitudinous, there has been no attempt made to compile its history.

The task of writing this small volume has not been an easy one. That buttons have been in use for thousands of years is certain, but they never had a chance of becoming indispensable until purely modern clothing came into vogue. Naturally, when garments were loose and flowing, the button was scarcely called for, and when it obtained a place on a garment it was there mainly for ornament ; assuredly utility was its secondary object.

But it would be extremely difficult to say when buttons first made their appearance. There are records of them in the literature of the Ancients, and they probably ranked as one of the objects of almost universal use. That they were not only familiar but common in Ancient Egypt is proved by the abundant discovery of these articles in all parts of that country. It is fairly obvious that their use was mainly ornamental,

but gradually throughout the world they lost their distinctive character, and became indispensable accessories to articles of clothing ; and so they have remained, and until we revert to the garb of our ancestors—which is extremely unlikely, although we try to get a suggestion of it in various cycles of fashion—so long will the button remain a utilitarian object ; although of the button it can legitimately be said that it is often capable of exercising two important functions, for ornamentation has assuredly never been more apparent in the button than it is to-day.

Originally the button was the pure product of craftsmanship, and it naturally remained so until fairly modern times, although there was always a disposition to seek to multiply its production : that is ever the tendency. But in strictly modern times it has been caught in the universal whirl of mass production, and probably it would be difficult to find any article which lends itself more readily to the modern craving for rapid reproduction. And in the last twenty years striking advances have been made in the methods of producing buttons of every variety, and some of the leading firms in the trade look rather askance at any attempt that is made to become familiar with their manufacturing methods. One can understand that, for the button trade has ever been the subject of fierce and at times relentless and unscrupulous foreign competition. Of late the trade has been reasonably free from competition in any virulent form, although we have plenty of rivals abroad, but the industry here still rather jealously guards any manufacturing secrets and methods which give it a slight lead over its rivals in other countries.

To speak generally, England has had a remarkable supremacy in the button trade. Other nations have had their specialities—that is almost axiomatic. France

for instance, has always made a speciality of porcelain buttons. But in most of the standard makes our supremacy has scarcely been challenged. We were the first nation to invent machinery and processes which made for abundant production, and only in cheap lines has our trade been threatened. In some of the cheapest we have scarcely taken the trouble to compete : the glass button trade, for instance, has never really had its home here, although we have led in most departments of the industry.

And Birmingham has been the real home of the button trade of the world. Her operatives have often been the chief means of bringing about competition from other centres in other countries. Birmingham early took the button trade to herself. She laid herself out to produce the pearl button, and created a large and flourishing industry, while in every phase of the metal button industry she gained and maintained something suggestive of a mild monopoly. Birmingham, indeed, found in the button trade some solace for the vanished buckle industry ; the one seemed to follow the other in easy sequence, and Birmingham's notorious adaptability in manufacture—for she is known as the city of a thousand trades—caused her to take with alacrity to the new industry.

Egyptologists tell us that the button must have had a great value in ancient Egypt, and for longer than history records the button has been the distinguishing badge of the Mandarin in China. The button, indeed, is the emblem by which the various castes or grades of aristocrats in China are known : there are nine grades, with a first and second class in each. In America the button has been more than a vogue ; it has been a rage, and every organization anxious to demonstrate or to hold its anniversary carnival or conference heralds the

occasion with the preparation of a special celluloid button. The linen button, of which countless millions must have been produced, was a Birmingham invention, and ranks as one of the most simple and interesting patents of modern times. Nothing is essential until it is produced and freely used, but it seems almost inexplicable that the linen button should have come so comparatively late in the world's history.

It has been said, indeed, that buttons mark the difference between ancient and modern styles of dress. The Ancients—and indeed the Oriental nations of to-day have not put off the old customs for new—delighted in loose and flowing robes, which were flung round the body, rather than conventionally “put on.” But from the time of the Roman toga there has been in the West a gradual departure from that type of dress, and it has been said that the fate of loose robes was sealed by the invention of buttons. But when anyone writes, as does one authority, of the invention of buttons about a century and a half ago, he is writing somewhat loosely, because buttons were known 4,000 years ago, although it is true that their use was scarcely so utilitarian as that of the modern button may be said to be. As has been said before, buttons were originally designed for ornament, and, therefore, in their earliest forms they were often very costly and indeed magnificent, but gradually it began to be realized that they had another property, that of utility, and therefore they were made smaller, and adapted so that they would fit the body closely.

Buttons, as already stated, have been freely used in the United States during the last half-century as decorations, or the sign of membership of some society or organization. These are usually of distinctive colours and appearance, and bear either a portrait or a motto

or a legend of some character. Among the organizations using such buttons may be mentioned the Royal Legion of the United States, organized in 1865 by the officers who had had the distinction of fighting in the Civil War. But the representatives of this ultra-modern nation are really only going back to remote ages for sanction for this usage, as Chinese officials have long worn a button or knob on their hats as a mark of rank, the grade of the wearer being denoted by its colour and material.

## CHAPTER II

### THE INCEPTION OF THE BUTTON TRADE

IT was not until the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign—notable indeed for the quickening of the artistic and inventive sense—that one can discover any trace of button-making, being regarded as a staple trade, and a trade furnishing any appreciable employment. The whole secret of the stabilization of button-making as a trade lay probably in the simple fact that before Elizabeth's time the button had been mainly an article of ornament; then it developed into an article of utility. The call for the one would be relatively infinitesimal, for the latter it would be extensive. Joseph Strutt, in his elaborate and learned work on the *Habits of the English*, said: “In the paintings of the sixteenth and succeeding centuries these ornaments frequently appeared on the garments of both sexes, but in a variety of instances they are drawn without the button holes, and placed in such situations as preclude the idea of their usefulness. Generally speaking, they are made of gold or silver, or are so depicted with very few exceptions. There is no reason to believe that the making of buttons was considered a business until near the seventeenth century, when the makers of the article formed a very considerable body. Their whole trade seems to have been confined to the making of buttons worked with the needle.

“In the fourth year of William and Mary, a new Act was made in favour of the button makers, which prohibited the importation of all foreign buttons made with hair. This again was followed by another six years

afterwards, imposing a penalty of 40s. for every dozen of covered buttons sold or set in garments, it having been represented to Parliament that many thousands of men, women and children within the Kingdom did depend upon the making of silk, mohair, gimp and thread buttons with the needle, and that great numbers of throwsters, spinners, winders, and others were employed in preparing the material for such buttons."

Whether or not the above protective measures influenced the results which followed one does not pretend to say, but the demand for buttons of all types grew and grew amazingly during the century that followed the reign of William and Mary, and not only were they popular as articles of utility, but extravagance in their fashioning became something suggestive of a craze. For instance, in one of the comedies of the period, the fantastic shapes and sizes of the buttons favoured by the fops of the day were keenly satirized, as the following lines will show—

" Next then the slouching sleeve, and our large button,  
And now our coats, flank broad, like shoulder mutton ;  
Faced with five colours—scarlet, green and sky,  
With sleeves so large, they'll give us wings to fly;  
Next year I hope they'll cover nails and all,  
And every button like a tennis ball."

It is supposed that the fashion for wearing cloth coats with many and extensive gilt buttons set in during the early part of the reign of George III. This is proved by a reference to be found in *St. James' Chronicle* of 1763, in which a writer in satirizing the tendency of the tradesmen to imitate the fashion of their superiors—that is the term—speaks of " the myriads of gold buttons and loops, high garteres, shoes, overgrown hats," etc. ; and dealing with one individual, a smith by trade, who came between the wind and his gentility, says severely



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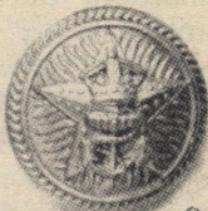
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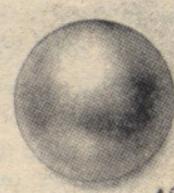
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### MILITARY BUTTONS

## MILITARY BUTTONS

*(Four-fifths of actual size)*

1. GILT MOUNTED, FIELD-MARSHAL.
2. GILT STRUCK, GENERAL.
3. GILT MOUNTED, STAFF (EDWARD VII).
4. DITTO FULL ARMS, DIPLOMATIC (EDWARD VII).
5. GILT STRUCK, INDIAN ARMY ..
6. DITTO, WARRANT OFFICER'S ..
7. DEAD GILT, INDIAN MEDICAL SERVICE ..
8. GILT STRUCK, SUPPLY AND TRANSPORT CORPS ..
9. GILT (NAVY QUALITY), INDIAN MARINES.
10. PLATED, 13TH LANCERS.
11. GILT STRUCK, 16TH CAVALRY.
12. GILT CAVALRY HALF BALL.
13. GILT STRUCK, 4TH RAJPUTS.
14. PLATED STRUCK, 20TH INFANTRY.
15. GILT STRUCK, 38TH DOGRAS.
16. GILT MOUNTED, 45TH SIKHS.
17. BLACK HORN, 1ST GURKHAS.
18. BRONZED BUGLE, RIFLES.

*By permission of Jennens & Co., Birmingham and London*

that "he had a coat laden with innumerable gilt buttons."

Referring to the multiplicity of buttons used in the dress of the period, one writer dealing with the fashion for gentlemen's attire says it called for "an exceedingly long tail-coat, having very large buttons; tight buck-skin breeches, buttoned at the knee, and tied with bunches of ribbons." Mr. John P. Turner, a leading Birmingham button manufacturer of the middle of the nineteenth century, who wrote an article on the Birmingham Button Trade in connection with the meeting of the British Association at Birmingham in 1865, in referring to this fashion said, "And, when gaiters were added, those were buttoned all down, and this fashion continued with some variations until about 1840, and included what may be called the Augustan age of button making in Birmingham."

It has been said that no single article of commerce has been more considered by the Legislature than the humble button. As one writer observed: "The button world has been ruled and regulated like a pampered child, and Acts and Bills by the dozen have been passed ordering what kind of buttons should be worn, and what kinds discarded; and on what false principles Birmingham buttons should be protected and every other kind of button manufactured prohibited." In the reign of Charles II, and later in that of William and Mary, foreign buttons were not to be imported under a penalty of £100 for the importer and £50 for the seller. Then William III fulminated against wooden buttons; also against buttons of cloth or stuff; Queen Anne decreed that no tailor or other person "shall make, sell, set on, use or bind on any clothes any button or button-holes of cloth, etc., on pain of £5 per dozen." Then George I followed in due course, and he ordained certain

restrictions, and finally the Press had to get to work and bring a little common sense to bear upon these restrictive and often harassing enactments. *The Gentleman's Magazine*, then a great power in the country, trained its guns upon the Government, and issued some fictitious minutes of the proceedings in the Senate of Lilliput, evidently fancying that ridicule would bring about what common sense had failed to achieve. And that has often been so in our history.

In 1721 very stringent laws were passed against cloth buttons for the encouragement of the metal trade, and these were carried to such a height that it was not competent for a tailor legally to obtain payment for a coat which he had made with cloth buttons ; as a matter of fact, the question was actually tried and the tailor was declared to be a misdemeanant and a law-breaker. Indeed, under the statute, all clothes exposed for sale with cloth buttons on them might be seized and forfeited, and even a private person, if he wore cloth or bound button holes, might have information laid against him and be fined 40s. a dozen, half the money to go to the informer—a very ingenious method of getting the public to take up a case. Indeed, we are told, " so the metal button manufacture lifted its head high as one of the privileged protected of the land, while his poor little cloth rival was obliged to smuggle himself into political existence before he could be received and recognized." We are told further that " these metal buttons had a certain currency value too, for during the Long War the shanks used to be cut off and the moulds passed as halfpence, to the confusion of a man's finance, and the detriment of his wardrobe."

In support of the contention that buttons were at first apparently used for the purpose of ornamentation it may be said that in *Piers Plowman*, 1377, appear two

references to "botones ouergylte"; then in a translation of Froissart's *Chronicles*, 1525, there is a reference to a book covered "with crimson velvet with ten botons of sylver and gylte." There is no mention of buttons in this country before the Norman Conquest, nor did Anglo-Saxon dress apparently require them. The earliest allusion to them is in the reign of Edward I, when the introduction of tighter-fitting garments gave them a definite utility as well as ornamentation. In a MS. poem (*Cotton Julius*), not later than 1300, the following lines appear—

" Botones azur'd wor ilke ane  
From his elboth to his hand."

and there are to be found in the illustrations and effigies of that period many examples of a tight sleeve with rows of buttons set quite thickly from the wrist to the elbow. Then naturally servants followed the fashions of their masters—

" Now our horse-clawers (grooms) clothed in pride  
They busk with buttons as it were a bride."

These allusions occur in Wright's *Political Songs*, which were published in the reign of Edward I, and buttons made their appearance about the same time in front of the tunic and also on the boots and shoes. The use of the button increased during the fourteenth century to a remarkable extent. In the "Romance of Sir De Grevant" the writer, speaking of the dress of the earl's daughter says, "to tell her botennes was toore" [toore was the equivalent of dure, hard. In our phraseology the sentence reads: to count her buttons would be difficult]. Later, one finds buttons of diamonds and other precious stones frequently mentioned. In the reign of Charles II they were scheduled among the wares imported into this country and were subject to

a very heavy duty. They are specified as follows—“Buttons of brass, steel, copper or latten ; crystal glass, silk, fine damask work, bugles and buttons for handkerchiefs.” It is, of course, generally known that “Handkerchief Buttons” was one of the familiar cries of London in Charles the First’s time. But diamond buttons were only for those who could afford them ; for others paste buttons of a wonderful description—indeed, they were apparently as brilliant as the finest stones—were very much in use in the eighteenth century. All the moulds cut in 1877, for instance, were of an enormous size, and there is a caricature extant of a beau with steel buttons, the effect of which is to dazzle the lady who faces them !

Now while this particular use has never been obscured, more especially in connection with feminine dress, buttons began to be employed as fastenings at least as early as the fifteenth century. In the fourteenth century the word button was used as a term of comparison for something trivial or worthless.

From the *London Gazette*, 13th to 17th Aug., 1674, it appears that George Duprey, Steward to the Duchess of Cleveland, had absconded. He was described as having a “dark coloured suit, lined with a phillamott mohair, and silver buttons.”

Then, according to Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, there was “A rebellious Baron in old time named Hugh Bigot that said in contempt to King Henry the Third, ‘If I were in my castell of Bungeie, upon the waters of Wanenie, I would not set a button by the King of Cockneie.’

There is an interesting allusion to buttons in *The Morning Herald* of Monday, 22nd February, 1830. It reads—

“His Majesty has been pleased to accept a richly gilt and beautifully executed set of buttons of Birmingham manufacture,

from the deputation of the trade now in London. The Royal Dukes, and some of the principal Nobility have also ordered their morning, as well as their dress suits to be decorated with gilt, instead of silk covered buttons. The gilt button is becoming fashionable in the ball and drawing room, and consequently will be generally adopted by all classes throughout the country."

In regard to the statutes prohibiting the use of the wearing of foreign buttons, there was one very interesting case. Special informers were engaged by manufacturers, and in one instance a customer informed against his own tailor for supplying him with a suit with covered buttons. Not only did he escape payment for these clothes, but he actually received the informer's share of the penalty imposed. But it is a curious commentary upon the artificial situation so produced that the judge, the counsel for the prosecution, and the majority of the jury were all wearing buttons which were contrary to the law of the land !

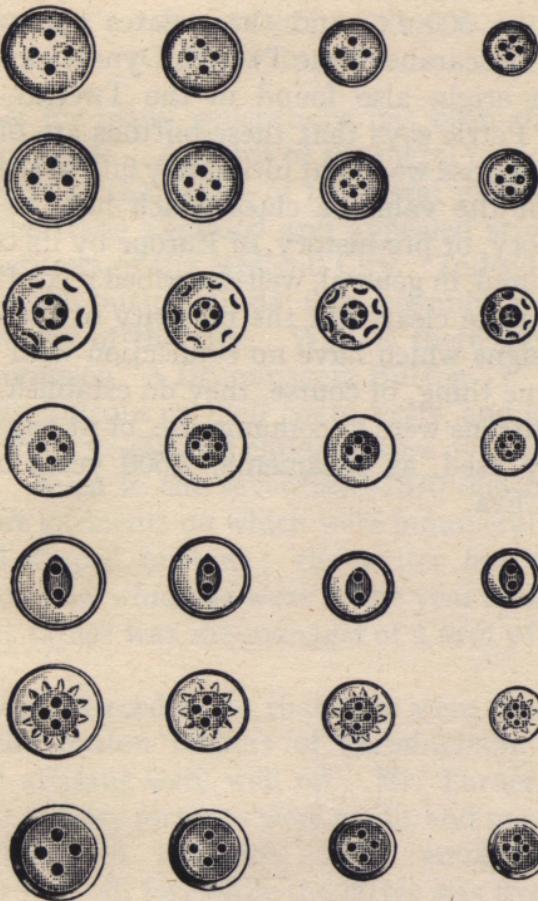
## CHAPTER III

### THE BUTTON IN ANCIENT EGYPT

THE greatest living authority on Egyptology, Professor W. Flinders Petrie, D.C.L., who has written with such erudition upon practically everything associated with the land which has of late been so much in everyone's thoughts, has not deemed the button too insignificant to attract his attention. As a matter of fact, he contributed to *The Antiquary*, in 1896, a wonderfully interesting article in which he gave no fewer than twenty-seven facsimile reproductions of ancient Egyptian buttons. The article was very educative, and Professor Petrie explained that he had collected many examples of ancient buttons discovered in Egypt, but found that many of them were foreign to that country alike in use and design. He found it difficult to form any theory as to their history, but he suggested that they made such an interesting subject that he felt justified in bringing them into notice, at the same time trusting that other collectors would provide fresh information in regard to them.

Now so far as is known, Egyptian dress in the ancient times never required buttons, the universal fastening being by bands, ties or loops. He stated that the button or toggle seemed to be rather European than Egyptian, and South European rather than North. Even two or three centuries ago the North European dress was tied together, the hose and doublet being secured by points or laces. As a matter of fact, Professor Petrie was often in doubt whether the article he illustrated should be regarded as a button or as a seal. In regard to many

of the buttons it was clear that the designs were not at all Egyptian ; many of them were akin to those on the black pottery bowls imported into Egypt by invaders from Libya, and probably the designs were of Italian origin. He showed an illustration of a button which bears two figures squatting down, reversed head to foot. This is of bone and was found at Tel-el-Amarna, and probably relates to the Eighteenth Dynasty. A more remarkable button from the same place depicts a man attacking a lion, and two sitting figures with a double loop between them. This is also of bone. Many of these buttons are obviously imitations of Egyptian designs, and their workmanship and style alike suggest that, although they were found in Egypt, they were made by foreigners. For instance, an amethyst from Koft, in Upper Egypt, gives a representation of the Sacred Hawk, which was the emblem of the Royal Soul, standing face to face with another hawk with ankh, the emblem of life, between them. Professor Petrie says of it, " This group is usual in the metal of bilateral inscriptions, but is seldom if ever found alone in Egyptian works. It has probably been copied as a royal group by someone not fully conversant with its use. A captive lies between the hawks, similar to the captives trampled by the Royal Sphinxes on the monuments." Then there is a very interesting illustration of the Royal Bee of Egypt, and also the Sacred Scarabaeus, on a small Carnelian button. A remarkable button was found in a tomb at Negateh, with a large number of beads obviously of the Twelfth Dynasty : it dates presumably, therefore, from before 2000 B.C. In this, however, there is no trace whatever of Egyptian ideas. The Professor shows various buttons dating from 700 B.C., but seems to have no doubt that the majority of them belong to immigrants from the Greek Islands and Italian coasts.



*Banks & Hammond, Birmingham*

*By permission of*

PEARL BUTTONS

But whatever their origin may be their age can be reasonably estimated. Several of them are made from materials belonging to the Twelfth Dynasty, or about 2,500 B.C. ; others come down to the Eighteenth Dynasty, or 500 B.C. and these dates agree with the discovery of scarabs of the Twelfth Dynasty and pottery of Cretan origin also found in the Twelfth Dynasty. Professor Petrie says that these buttons are of amazing interest, because we might ultimately find in their history another of the valuable clues which help to date the early history, or pre-history, of Europe by its connection with long and, in general, well-described record of Egypt. But it is quite clear that the majority of these buttons are of designs which have no connection with Egyptian signs. One thing, of course, they do establish, and that is, that buttons were in common use, or at any rate were commonly used, as ornaments, 2,500 years before the Christian Era.

## CHAPTER IV

### BIRMINGHAM'S PERSISTENCY : FROM BUCKLES TO BUTTONS

BIRMINGHAM for many generations has been the home of the button trade. And not of the metal button trade only, although as the centre of the metal industry that section of the trade appealed and appealed strongly to the manufacturers of the Midland City. Indeed, at one time the metal button trade was possibly the most general industry of the city. Who is there unfamiliar with the expression "A Brummagem Button"? Gentlemen wore gilt buttons on their coats, vests, and leggings, ladies used them freely, and children were over-weighted with them. Even in the seventies—1870 one means—children wore garments on which were innumerable rows of diamond shaped buttons; the writer has some in his possession now which he wore in the year mentioned. But then his father was the manager of a firm of button makers.

The decades antecedent to that date were prosperous times for the button makers of Birmingham. Both makers and artisans were well off. Mr. Turner, in his article says: "Easy fortunes were made, and many local families grew into affluence. Both employer and artisan were well off, for, while the latter was frequently able to earn his £2 to £4 a week, the former was often obtaining his £2,000 to £3,000 a year, a sum which, though small compared with the income arising from some more important manufactures, was a large amount to be derived from such an article as buttons, unless in very exceptional cases."

And there were periods when not only was the demand for metal buttons overwhelming, but foreign competition was prevented by protective duties ; in addition to which that competition had not developed as it did at a later period when Sir Robert Peel caused all restrictive duties on buttons to be abolished. The time came when the foreigner had the market at his mercy if he could produce cheaper than we in the home country were in a position to do, and that he did long before the period of which Mr. Turner, himself the head of an important firm, wrote that "where he can make cheaper and better he has in so far depressed the home manufacturer." But, at the time when the easy fortunes were made, not only was the home trade flourishing, but there was a large demand for buttons from continental countries, while the trade of America was largely in our hands.

It is worthy of note that the button trade of Birmingham grew as the buckle trade declined. At one time the buckle trade was one of Birmingham's distinctive industries. The buckle was universal, and the price ranged from a shilling to five and even ten guineas a pair. Birmingham supplied the whole demand, not only for Great Britain, but also for America, France, Germany, Holland, Spain, and Italy. In 1790, however, the fashion changed and the trade had a rapid decline. The "effeminate shoe string," as it was contemptuously called, had sounded the death knell of the buckle. A petition from the buckle makers to the Prince of Wales in 1791 begged him to help to provide employment for more than 20,000 persons who, in consequence of the prevalence of shoe strings and slippers, were in terrible distress, and His Royal Highness and also the Duke of York ordered their gentlemen and attendants to discard shoe strings and revert to buckles at once. A year later another petition was presented to the Duke and

Duchess of York, and here the petitioners claimed that, as metal buttons were protected, buckles should enjoy a similar privilege. But the buckle had had its day, and before the century was out a great industry had practically become extinct.

But, as the buckle trade faltered, so the button trade flourished. And well it might, for cloth buttons were proscribed by law. The discovery made in 1790 that by a process of "dipping" a gilt button could be produced both readily and cheaply had a great effect upon the trade. It also produced—not unnaturally—a considerable amount of friction. From the year 1790 to 1795 many meetings of button manufacturers were held, each section naturally being keen upon protecting its own branch of the industry. The chief object of those meetings was to insist upon the necessity of marking all buttons "gilt" or "plated" only when they were really covered with gold and silver, and not when they were merely dipped. Indeed, the Statutes of Anne and George I were still operative, imposing a penalty of £5 "on any Taylor or other person convicted of making, covering, selling, or using, or setting on to a garment any button covered with cloth or any stuff of which garments are made, and notice was given that these penalties would be enforced." The leading figure in Birmingham commercial life, Matthew Boulton, acted as chairman at one of these meetings, and waxed eloquent in his denunciation of the deception of marking "gilt" on buttons which were not gilt, and "plated" or those which were not plated, but merely dipped. Speaking with his customarily ornate and polished diction, he said, "As I am an old button maker, allow me to advise my brethren to make excellence rather than cheapness their principle of rivalry; and pardon me if I advise the merchant to be satisfied with buying good

commodities at a fair price ; to lay aside the arts of reduction, and not to expect to buy his goods cheaper than any other man who has money in his hand."

But, in turn, the time came when the metal button trade began to decline. As recently as 1830 and indeed, in 1850, deputations went from Birmingham asking for the patronage of Royalty and the Court for metal buttons, but, as was said in the petition of the buckle makers more than half a century previously, "Fashion is void of feeling and deaf to argument." The change from the picturesque coats and breeches with leggings to the severely plain early Victorian period came about, and buttons were either absent or severely plain in appearance.

Little is known of some of the early members of the Birmingham metal button trade. The first of whom there is a record is a Mr. Baddaley. He retired from business somewhere about 1739, and lived in the famous Old Square, where Johnson stayed with his well-known bookseller friend Hector. He is known to have been the inventor of the oval chuck, and various appliances which materially simplified and improved the methods of manufacture. Then William Hutton, in his *History of Birmingham*, tells us of John Taylor, who was High Sheriff for Warwickshire in 1756. He was the inventor of many improvements relating to gilt, plated, and also lacquered buttons, and at one period the value of the output of buttons from his factory alone was £800 a week—a large sum as production was then.

## CHAPTER V

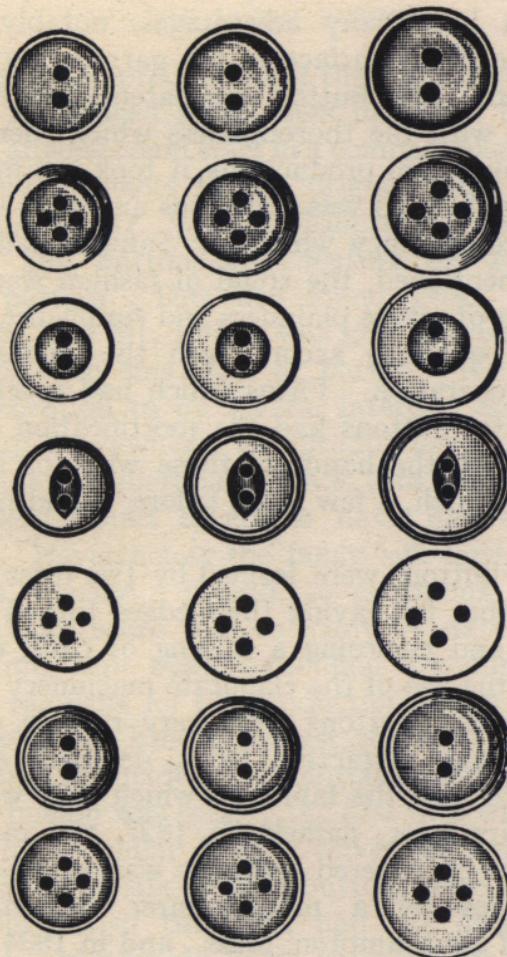
### INVENTION OF THE COVERED BUTTON

MATTHEW Boulton at one time had an unrivalled reputation as the maker of certain types of buttons. He specialized in inlaid and steel buttons, and we find that as early as 1745 his great inventive genius had been attracted to the trade and he was responsible for several typical improvements in the production of the designs which he favoured. He seems to have favoured the trade not only in his younger days, but even after the establishment of the famous Soho Works. Steel buttons were a speciality of his, and history has it that one of the many departments of that famous factory was devoted to the production of steel buttons cut with facets, and these were sold at the seemingly extravagant price of 140 guineas the gross. But then, of course, the productions of Soho Foundry enjoyed a special reputation everywhere, and it really seemed as though every department of industry that Matthew Boulton touched he dignified. Assuredly his silver-ware has never been excelled.

Then there was a Mr. Clay identified with the trade in Birmingham. He was the inventor of papier mâché, and in the year 1778 he took out a patent for producing buttons out of that material. This patent was afterwards extended, the extension being given on the ground of the patentee's having invented a new method of securing the shanks, then possibly the most troublesome part of the button. As showing the immense range of buttons then produced in Birmingham, it is on record that Mr. Clay produced buttons of slate, and

that these had a great vogue. Another important member of the trade was Mr. Ralph Heaton, whose name was and is a household word in manufacturing circles. He was a man of many activities, although the name of the family, of course, is always indissolubly connected with the Mint ; but he is known to have established a works for the production of button shanks on an improved principle, these works coming into operation in the closing year of the eighteenth century : they were situated in Slaney Street.

Naturally the disappearance of the long tail-coat with gilt buttons, and breeches and leggings similarly adorned, caused the trade to take different trends. It is nothing for fashion to go to extremes, and it is significant that the picturesque style originally mentioned gave place to the severest and practically buttonless garments of the next generation. Quite a novelty in buttons—in fact the experiment has been styled the first serious innovation in the trade—was the production of covered buttons. These were produced by a Mr. B. Sanders, whose history was a very interesting one. Mr. Sanders had the misfortune to lose a substantial fortune in Denmark when Lord Nelson bombarded Copenhagen with such determination ; obviously vacillation in politics was not a failing of that period, and Lord Nelson had a reputation, which he subsequently consolidated, for doing things thoroughly. At any rate the bombardment left Mr. Sanders with only a remnant of his fortune, and he came to England in the hope of rehabilitating his finances. He started business in an unsubstantial way in Birmingham, and he rather startled the trade by introducing a covered button made of cloth or similar material, and possessing an iron shank. His son, Mr. B. Sanders, junr., seems to have been somewhat of a genius, for he improved this iron shank into what is



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called the flexible shank button : that is, he introduced a piece of canvas protruding through the back of the button and taking the place of the shank, and through this substance a needle could pass freely in any direction. The button had many advantages, notably that it presented no harsh surface to the garment to which it was attached. This button was patented in 1825 and, being made with the thoroughness which then characterized Birmingham productions, it took the market by storm. The demand was enormous and very soon produced the competency which Mr. Sanders had desired. As before mentioned, the trend of fashion was then in the direction of severe plainness and simplicity, and this button was quite in accord with the tastes of that particular generation. Firms which had specialized in gilt and metal buttons had the mortification of seeing trade pass into the hands of those who specialized in productions which, a few years before, would have been scoffed at.

Sanders's buttons were formed by two discs of metal locked together by having their edges turned back on each other and enclosing a folding of cloth or pasteboard ; by the use of the elaborate machinery designed for the purpose, buttons were very rapidly produced presenting most attractive faces, designed especially to harmonize with the fabric on which they were used. Twenty years later, namely in 1827, the mechanical manufacture of covered buttons was started in the United States by a manufacturer named Samuel Williston, of Easthampton, Mass., and in 1834 he fused his activities with those of Joel and Josiah Hayden of Haydenville.

## CAHPTER VI

### THE LINEN BUTTON

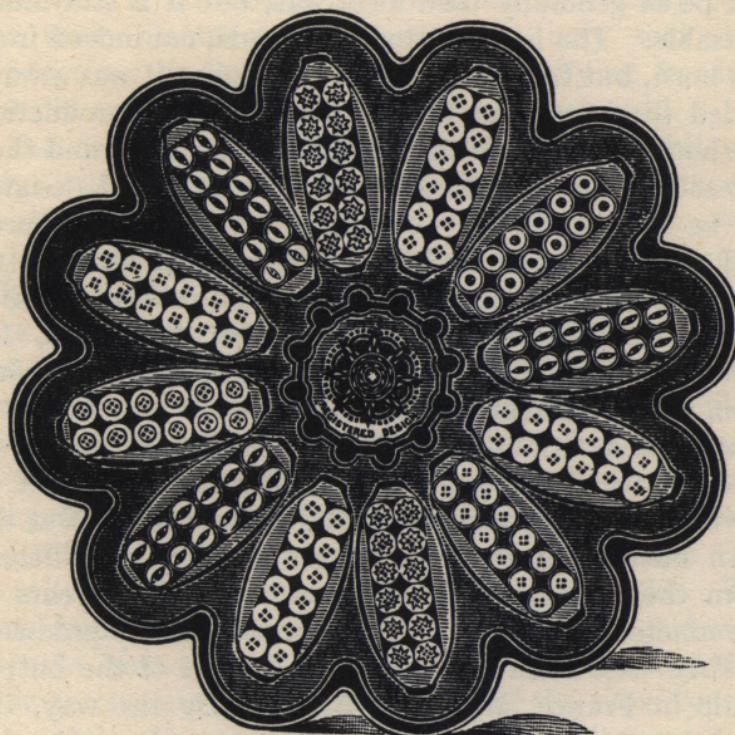
NATURALLY the production of these covered and flexible buttons introduced numberless imitators to the trade, in which anyone could start in a comparatively small way, and many offshoots of the original soft button were produced. A Mr. William Elliott in 1837, produced a fancy silk button, one feature of which was a centred pattern. This also found great favour with the public, but Mr. Elliott was not allowed to have the monopoly with this class of button. His patent was taken exception to by several interests and imitations sprang up everywhere, the production of which must have made considerable inroads into the profits which Mr. Elliott would otherwise have derived from his novelty. Nevertheless the fancy silk button was very much in demand ; indeed, so enormous was its sale that it is on record that as many as sixty looms were at one time kept busy in London weaving the special material requisite for the production of the button, and, despite what Mr. Elliott, at least, regarded as illegitimate competition, he made a substantial fortune. Naturally this silk button was merely the first of a whole series of articles of a similar type ; velvet buttons became a great vogue and silk-twisted buttons were also fashionable. Buttons of this type had one disability only ; they were exceedingly liable to wear out at the edge through the constant friction produced by buttoning and unbuttoning, and the obvious need was some form of protection which would give durability to the material at this weak point, but would not mar the appearance

of the article. The hour usually brings forth the man, and the corded-edge button was patented by a Mr. John Chatwin, of Birmingham. It may be said that buttons of this kind had their day but have never really ceased to be ; fashion changed and fluctuated and for a time they fell into disuse but only to reappear in perhaps another decade.

It almost goes without saying that novelty succeeded novelty in this trade ; it gave the versatile inventor special scope and there seemed no end to the succession of new forms of the same article. About the year 1841 a Mr. John Aston, a very famous member of the trade, whose works in Princip Street, Birmingham, long ranked as one of the leading houses in the industry, became the patentee of an invention of one of the most extraordinary, and also one of the most erratic, geniuses of that time, the famous Humphrey Jeffreys, whose feats with kites and balloons were then the talk of the Midland city. This invention was the three-fold linen button. This button was formed on a ring of metal and a linen covering so produced that both sides and centre were completely covered with separate pieces of linen. Here again an obvious want was supplied, and this button, which was a model of neatness and convenience, at once superseded the old-fashioned thread button, a Dorsetshire speciality, which was formed of a ring of wire with threads drawn over and over it and gathered into the centre. The Dorsetshire button had held almost a monopoly for use in connection with underwear, but the three-fold linen button was an immense improvement upon the old wire ring button.

No sooner however, had the linen button been patented by Mr. J. Aston than the versatile Mr. William Elliott, the inventor of the fancy silk button, improved upon it materially ; for, like sensible men, the two worked in

concert instead of fighting each other, and did a remarkable business with the new patent. Mr. Turner, in the article previously mentioned, cites some facts giving an idea of the importance of the manufacture of the three-fold linen button. He states that Messrs. Dain, Watts



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and Manton, who were the successors to Mr. Elliott, consumed in 1864 (Mr. Turner's article was written in 1865) in the production of this small article alone 63,000 yds. of cloth and 34 tons of metal, 250 hands being employed by the firm. And Mr. Turner adds: "This is an amount that would seem incredible on

less trustworthy authority than that of the firm themselves."

Next came the horn button, and here again a mild revolution was wrought, although by the way, the linen button has never been superseded to this day ; it may not be so generally used as it was, but it is still indispensable. The horn button was made, not indeed from the horn, but from the hoof of cattle, but it was always styled the horn, and for the purpose of its production the hoof was cut into the required shape, dyed and then pressed into most artistic and indeed beautiful designs. To be quite accurate, horn buttons were manufactured and manufactured freely, in Birmingham as early as 1801, and the commoner qualities were retailed at what would seem ridiculous prices ; 5½d. the gross, for instance. William Hutton, in his *History of Birmingham*, makes reference to the cloaks of our grandmothers ornamented with horn buttons nearly the size of a crown piece, a watch or a john-apple, curiously wrought as having passed through the Birmingham press. But the horn buttons of the later period were quite different from the clumsy productions of the earliest years of the nineteenth century. They were originally produced in their best form by one of the leaders of the button trade in France, M. Emile Bassot. By the way, the French button trade has always been one of considerable importance, and M. Bassot had a world-wide reputation as the leader of the French button trade. Mr. John P. Turner was on terms of intimacy with him, and pays what is doubtless a well-deserved tribute to " his devoted intelligence in promoting La Boutonnerie." M. Bassot by the way, was elected juror in the great exhibitions of 1851 and 1855, and right up to his death in 1864 he was accepted as the greatest authority on button-making in France. Although the horn button was originated by

M. Bassot, it was produced in very beautiful style by various Birmingham manufacturers, and Mr. Turner specially singles out Mr. Thomas Cox and Mr. T. W. Ingram of Birmingham, and Mr. Thomas Harris, of Halesowen, as specialists in the production of beautiful specimens of buttons in this material. For many years the three manufacturers named not only sold their productions in Great Britain with gratifying freedom, but did an export trade to all parts of the world.

But fashion again changed ; the demand fell off ; other varieties exerted their supremacy, and, although hoof button making has never died out, it has never enjoyed the special popularity with which it was originally endowed. The next button to command attention was the button made of vegetable ivory or the Corozo nut button. About half-way through the nineteenth century it had an extensive patronage, and took the place of the beads and other ornaments which were previously in vogue. And, of course, Birmingham had a share in its production. Doubtless many people have in their old stores samples of the vegetable ivory button ; they were turned out in almost incalculable quantities. The nuts from which these buttons were constructed were brought from various parts of South America, and they grow in clusters on trees somewhat of the same type as the palm. The shell is a very substantial one and the material is a beautiful milky white, but much softer and very much lighter in weight than ivory. It is wonderfully adaptable material, for it can be turned in the lathe and can be also dyed to any shade. For some years these buttons were produced on a very large scale in Birmingham, and at the time when Mr. Turner wrote, fifteen or sixteen tons a week of these nuts, worth about £30 a ton, were cut up into buttons in Birmingham, and the trade employed at least 700 hands. The

introduction of the vegetable ivory button was important in many ways, for its use was primarily responsible for the introduction of endless composite materials designed in imitation of the original. Most of these, however, had an ephemeral popularity, but one material patented by Mr. J. S. Manton in 1860 and made from mineral earth had an extensive popularity. The vegetable ivory button, however, always held its own so long as fashion decreed that a button of that particular type should be used.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE PEARL BUTTON INDUSTRY

ONE of the most fascinating chapters of Birmingham history, if it could be adequately dealt with, would, undoubtedly, be one devoted to the pearl button trade : that was, even within the memory of living people, a typical Birmingham industry. It was essentially a Birmingham industry ; strangely enough Birmingham has been, despite the endless fluctuations and changes of fashion, the real home of the button trade. How many thousands of gross of pearl buttons were turned out in Birmingham during the long period when that particular button held sway—and very few buttons of what one might call a special type held a longer sway—it would be impossible to say. The pearl button trade was a very interesting one ; indeed it was a very fascinating one, and it is easy to understand the tremendous boom the pearl button had. It was beautifully produced, the material was delicate, and the workmanship excellent, and for a long time at any rate no very elaborate machinery was employed in the production of the pearl button. It was essentially a material which called for real craftsmanship, and for a long period it gave employment, and remunerative employment too, to a large number of Birmingham people. Birmingham has always possessed skilled craftsmen, but the Birmingham of that day had special reason to be proud of the men who produced the beautiful specimens which went out to the world as Birmingham pearl buttons. Usually the pearl button was produced by a skilful mechanic assisted only by a small foot lathe ; the material was not such as

could be subjected to the operation of machinery driven by steam power.

The consumption of mother-of-pearl, from which the buttons were cut, was at one time extraordinary. The writer, in his younger days, knew thousands of tips in Birmingham into which the waste mother-of-pearl and the debris from pearl button manufactories were thrown. Many legends centred round some of these tips. For instance, the writer has more than once heard people who had an association of some kind with the pearl button trade say that the Town Hall of Birmingham could be taken down and re-erected on another site without financial loss to anyone undertaking the task, because of the immense wealth of material which is deposited under its foundations. The same fable, for possibly that is the correct expression to use, is current in regard to various other Birmingham buildings. At any rate, it is a fact that so prodigal were the pearl button makers with their material, so abundant and cheap was that material, and so elementary were the methods adopted for cutting the button, or rather the piece of pearl from which the button was to be shaped—for when new and improved methods came into vogue practically nothing was thrown away—that the writer has seen great pieces of waste ground literally covered with what would be to-day good mother-of-pearl. You could see just a few circular holes which had been drilled in order to extract what was probably the most eligible piece of pearl in the shell, and the rest would be discarded: then more rubbish would be heaped on it; then that would be covered with pearl waste and more rubbish heaped on, until finally—and this has happened in every case—the site would be covered with buildings. It is indicative of the remarkable vogue that the pearl button had that pearl

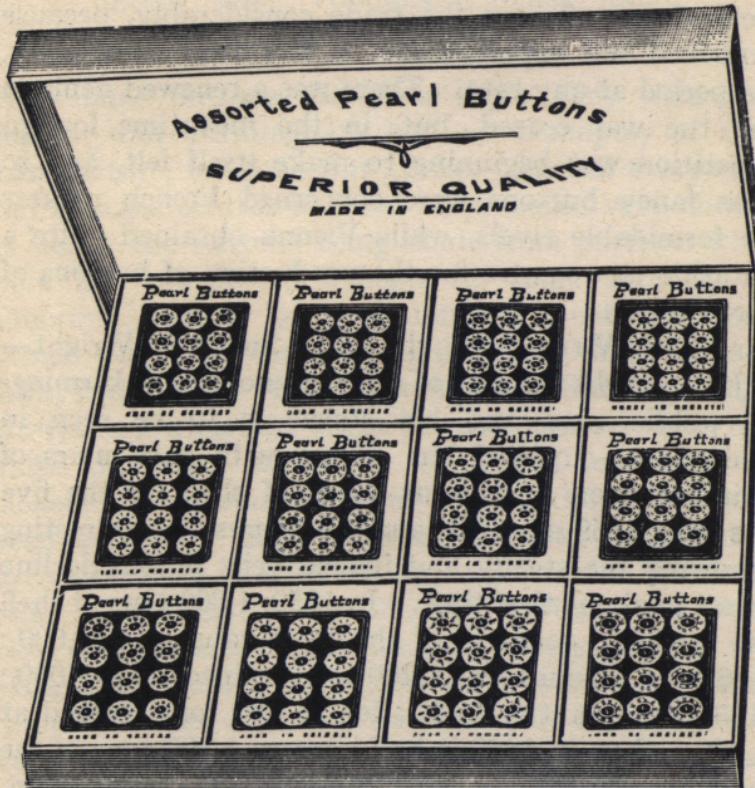
waste was to be found in practically every tip in the city.

Now the mother-of-pearl from which the button was cut is of various kinds, and some buttons possessed considerable value. What are known as Macassar pearls come almost exclusively from the seas round Macassar, which is in the East Indies. These shells, which are the "mothers of the priceless pearls beloved of the woman of fashion," are by far the largest in size and also by far the purest in grain of any to be found in the world. Their value in Birmingham in the middle of last century was from £140 to £160 a ton. But, while the white-edged Macassar shell was the patrician, there were other shells in vogue, because naturally pearl buttons vary in quality and accordingly in price; all could not afford to pay for buttons wrought from pearls worth £160 a ton. Manilla shells are almost as large, but they always have rather a yellow tinge along their border; that materially reduces their value as compared with the Macassar pearl, and in addition Manilla pearls have other drawbacks—they are very brittle. However, they have their special use, and they were then in great demand in the Sheffield cutlery trade for knife handles: their price ranged from £100 to £120 a ton. Then there were various shells which came from the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, but gradually the supply of these became very intermittent as the fisheries became exhausted. These Bombay and Alexandrian shells, as they were termed in the trade, were comparatively small in size and had not the delicacy of tint nor the clearness of the shells previously mentioned. Another shell which had a special popularity came from the Pacific and was styled the Black shell, because when properly polished it had an exquisitely dark shade full of rainbow tints, these being most artistically blended. However, portions

of the shell could also be utilized for the production of white buttons which were almost as clear, and second only in quality to those fashioned out of the best Macassar shells. The cheaper pearl buttons were fashioned also from shells brought from the Pacific ; they were mainly found in the vicinity of the Pearl Islands in the Bay of Panama. Indeed they were called Panama shells, but frequently they run no larger than the ordinary oyster shell, and when they are of that size their value is comparatively small. Their price used to be from £20 to £30 a ton, and only buttons of comparatively inferior type were produced from them.

Birmingham in these days (we are speaking now of the middle of last century, roughly about seventy-five years ago) was, as indeed it has always been (but it was then essentially so), a town of little masters, and it used to be almost a proverb in the city that 5s. was capital enough to begin making pearl buttons : that of course, suggested a minimum, if not indeed an almost entire absence, of machinery ; it suggested that the only capital required was a deft pair of hands and a room. This was not true, because after all the raw material had to be acquired, but it is true that there were an enormous number of small makers, because any ordinary workman could start on his own account should he feel so disposed, and Birmingham people have almost a mania for working on their own account. It has been said that many a Birmingham man would rather make 50s. by being his own master than he would make £5 as a workman in the service of an employer. So it came about that there was a multiplicity of small makers in the pearl button trade, and comparatively few establishments at that time employed more than fifty hands, and very few employed so many. But naturally, one outcome of that was that a few important

business houses supplied the whole of the material to the little masters, of whom there were at that time about one hundred in Birmingham, and at the same time they took the whole of their output, so that in a sense they were the



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only real employers. It was a curious trade, and certain streets in Birmingham had colonies of small button makers.

It is estimated that when the pearl button trade was at the height of its activity, and its products were at the height of their popularity, about 3,000 pairs of hands were engaged in the trade in Birmingham, and these firms cut up each week about three or four tons of the

best shells, and probably about thirty tons of the more common kinds. From 1855 to 1860, however, the industry began to decline and in 1865 not more than 2,000 hands were engaged. The American War of Independence affected the trade considerably, because it knocked the export trade on the head completely, for a period at any rate. There was a renewed demand when the war ceased, but, in the meantime, foreign competition was beginning to make itself felt, and so far as fancy buttons were concerned French makers were formidable rivals, while Vienna obtained quite a reputation as a centre for the production of buttons of various types.

Mr. J. S. Wright, of the firm Smith & Wright—Mr. J. S. Wright was one of the most notable of Birmingham public men and his statue is to be seen in Birmingham—supplied Mr. Turner with particulars of the importation of various kinds of shell for the five years from 1859 onwards, and the figures are interesting as showing the steady and indeed very serious decline that set in about that time. In 1859, 1,800 tons of shell came into this country, of the total value of £66,000 : in 1860 the amount was 1,200 tons, valued at £47,000 : in 1861 the quantity had fallen to 650 tons, valued at £31,000 ; then in 1862 it had risen to 1,100 tons of the same value, £31,000, while in 1863 only 800 tons came in, the total value being £25,000. It is estimated that about 25 per cent. of this would be re-exported to the Continent, or else would be used in Sheffield in connection with the cutlery trade, so that about 75 per cent. of the whole importation was probably used in the Birmingham button trade.

The pearl button trade still flourishes ; many prominent firms in Birmingham are still associated with that phase of the button industry.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BONE, HORN, PORCELAIN, GLASS, AND OTHER BUTTONS

THEN bone buttons had their day : they were very popular, but Birmingham had no monopoly of their manufacture, for bone was always plentiful everywhere and in some centres it could be procured very cheaply as waste, the buttons being made from portions which were not substantial enough for large articles. An abnormal number of bone buttons must have been turned out, and the trade still exists, and probably always will exist. Then buttons made from wood have always had a certain vogue ; wood buttons were once quite the rage, especially for heavy overcoats and jackets of a substantial type. Again, there has always been a call for glass buttons, and more particularly for glass used in combination with metal or various other substances. Naturally, glass buttons have always been made in many qualities ; the very plain ones were exceedingly cheap, but those which were cut or made to imitate more expensive materials had a very different value. Glass buttons were frequently sold at as low a price as 2d. a gross ; this was one of the poorest phases of the button trade. But glass buttons were never so freely produced in Birmingham as they were in Paris, while probably the cheapest centre for the production of glass beads was Bohemia, which was the home of the glass trade : there the output would be prodigious and prices were absurdly low.

It is worthy of note that porcelain buttons are said to have been first invented by a Birmingham man, a

Mr. R. Prosser. He patented porcelain buttons somewhere about 1840, and indeed acted in consort with the famous firm of Minton & Co., North Staffordshire porcelain specialists, who produced them and had a sale for them. But, although a Birmingham invention, they were never made in Birmingham and neither were they made in the Potteries for any length of time, because the French early made quite a speciality of the trade, and so powerful was their competition that they forced Messrs. Minton & Co. to give up the business as hopeless. Doubtless Messrs. Minton & Co. had their own remunerative trade to consider and did not think it worth while persevering with a section of their trade at which they were not supreme, and porcelain button making became lost to this country. The French, however, have all along retained this trade, and their methods of production are so efficient that very few articles have ever been turned out so perfectly and at the same time so cheaply.

Concerning this button Mr. Turner writes, "A great gross, that is twelve gross each of twelve dozen, is sold for elevenpence, every button beautifully made, regularly carded on good paper, and admirably turned out in every respect ; the very paper they are on would be thought worth the money." Of the endless ramifications of the button trade it would be useless to attempt to speak in detail ; one has simply tried to indicate the major lines in connection with the trade : to attempt to enumerate the list of materials from which buttons have been made and can be made would be impossible ; a very much shorter task would be to enumerate the materials from which they have not been made. They have been produced in every metal from gold to iron and with every alloy of every metal ; they have been made from every natural product which is capable of

being cut or turned or pressed, such for instance as hoof, pearl, ivory, jade, horn, nuts, papier mâché, leather, glass, and porcelain. They have been made too from every fabric from satin and velvet to canvas.

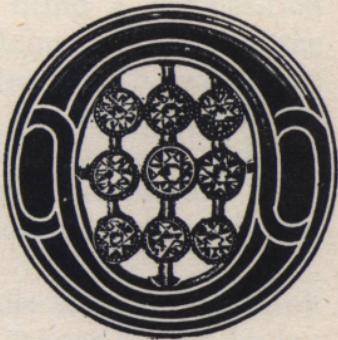
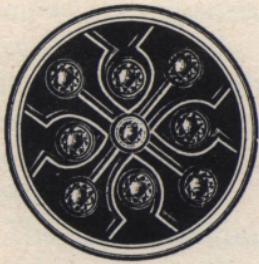
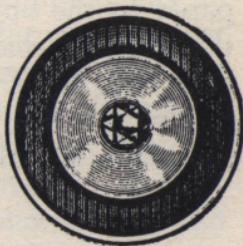
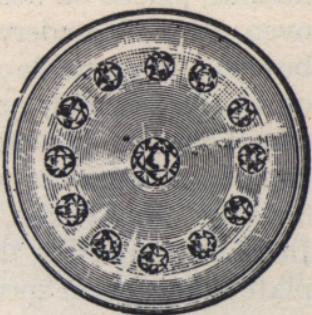
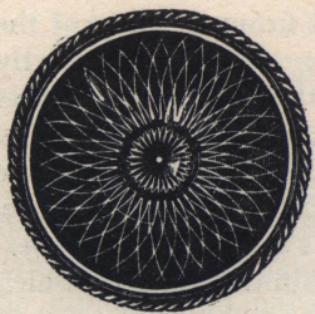
Originally silk buttons appear to have been made at Macclesfield, which was, of course, the home of silk weaving, but Birmingham did not long leave the making of covered buttons in the hands of the men of that town. For a considerable time the mould of bone or wood was covered by hand, but, thanks to the ingenuity of a Birmingham man, it became possible to cover the mould by mechanical means. The inventor of this method was one Ainsworth ; he was induced to dispose of his patent, and it was bought by a well-known member of the Birmingham trade named Sanders, the patentee receiving £300 a year for fourteen years. Possibly the patentee was reasonably well satisfied with his bargain : assuredly the individual who made the purchase was, for it is stated that he made £40,000 from it, and that was a very substantial sum in those days. But business men had their difficulties even in those primitive times, for it is on record that Sanders and his methods were the object of much curiosity, and he was constrained to remove his factory from Birmingham to Bromsgrove, in order to escape the prying eyes of unscrupulous competitors, who, we are told, used every means, legitimate and otherwise, to discover the secret of his method. The covered button indeed had a wide popularity, and in 1850, one firm alone used 20,000 yds. of material for this purpose and 2 tons of paper packing, weekly.

One hundred and fifty years ago the hoofs of cattle supplied practically the whole of the material from which horn buttons were manufactured. The hoof possesses the property of becoming plastic when heated, and the fact that it yielded a copy in relief in a die caused it to

be universally used for the production of buttons. The process was that the hoofs were boiled until they became quite soft ; they were then cut into strips with a long plated knife working in a staple ; then these strips were again cut across so that squares were produced, and these were then brought into octagonals by taking off the corners. The blanks were next subjected to a dyeing process, and then the pieces of horn were placed in heated dies. The die-holder had a hinged cover which was closed down upon the horn, and then the holder and its contents were transferred to a vice and subjected to great pressure. If the buttons had to be shanked with metal, these were attached by pressure, being laid in the die-holder in depressions made to receive the shanks : if on the contrary the button was one which had to be sewn on, three or four holes were drilled in it by the same number of revolving drills.

Fancy glass buttons were made from what were called "canes" of coloured glass, heated at the end and then pinched with die-tools with sufficient force to obtain the impress on the die's being transferred to them. The shank of these was put in much on the same lines as the horn button was shanked, but, after a hole was pinched through the button, a long shank neck with a metal collar was passed through and lifted on to the front side. In some varieties the neck of the button was soldered to a small disc of metal to which the shank was fastened, so that when the heat was applied the solder fused and the neck and the button were firmly joined. These glass buttons were finished by grinding the edge of the surface.

The process of making porcelain buttons was exceedingly interesting and was very closely akin to that of producing any small ornamental article of earthenware. The moistened clay was pressed into plaster-of-Paris



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**FANCY BUTTONS**

moulds, placed on boards to dry and then taken to the oven, where it underwent the first firing. Many of the buttons were made uncoloured ; others were partly or wholly painted, and in some the designs were most complicated. The painting was done by hand or by transfer-printing as required. The colours were then fixed by the articles, being baked in a muffle furnace. In transfer-printing the design was printed from copper-plate by means of special ink on thin tissue paper, which was placed while the impression was still moist, and then allowed to dry, and the design was transferred from the paper to the object. Then the design was burnt in in the muffle furnace. When the baking processes had all been completed, the button was subjected to the ordinary glazing process just as though it were a piece of ordinary porcelain, and then the shank was added.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE METAL BUTTON

It would be difficult to enumerate all the branches of the button trade with which Birmingham has been identified. Birmingham was essentially the home of the military and naval ornament trade, and uniform buttons which were used by the military and naval authorities and for livery purposes were practically all made here, at any rate, during the latter part of last century. These various uniform buttons were often gilt or plated or chased or stamped or pierced or enamelled. There was an enormous trade in ordinary trouser buttons. Then there were japanned buttons of various metals : usually the metal buttons were a compound of brass and spelter ; the proportions varied naturally with the quality and kind required. What was termed gilding metal was normally used, this being a composition which lent itself specially to gilding. Originally the somewhat expensive gilt buttons which well-to-do people wore in the early part of last century had the gilt deposited by the old quick-silver process, and this was in many respects an admirable process and gave far better results than the modern electro-gilding method.

The electro-gilding process, while suitable for many articles, was never regarded with favour by the trade ; indeed many held that it was that process which was originally responsible for the old gilt button's going out of favour : whereas the gilt imparted by the quick-silver process was reasonably permanent, the button that was turned out by the new process comparatively

soon became tarnished, especially if neglected. Indeed it was an axiom of the trade at that time that the inferior goods sent out as the result of the adoption of the simpler and much less expensive process had more than anything else to do with the disfavour with which gilt buttons came to be regarded. This depression began to make itself felt about the year 1840, which was in many ways a time of transition in commercial circles. It is significant that a few years later—and it is remarkable how history repeats itself—both employers and artisans joined in a deputation to Prince Albert in an endeavour to induce him, not indeed to formulate any decree as his predecessors would have been asked to do, but merely to try to bring the wearing of fancy gilt buttons into favour by himself leading the way.

Mr. J. P. Turner has an interesting reference to this episode in the article to which allusion has once or twice been made. Writing of this deputation he says, “ The rivalry of different firms for the fortunate honour of being the producers of such sets of buttons as should be selected by the Prince from the large assortment offered to his taste on that occasion ; the urbanity of the Prince ; his reception of them and so forth, were intoxicating topics of conversation and speculation among the trade in my boyhood. But hope deferred maketh the heart sick ; these sanguine gentlemen all had to learn that a prince, however gracious, does not carry the fiats of the fickle goddess in his buttonhole, and that the revolutions of fashion are to be made by measures more in accordance with sound judgment, good taste and manly industry.”

The writer has often heard his father discuss this deputation to the Prince Consort, for he himself was interested in the button trade, and he was wont to speculate as to the peculiar way in which history re-enacts episodes ; for, after all, the leaders of the

Birmingham button trade were only doing what the buckle makers had done rather more than half a century previously.

As this was unquestionably the most eventful period of the button trade's history, it would be decidedly interesting to give some details concerning the number of men employed at the period referred to, namely 1864 to 1865. Mr. Turner, who was himself a member of the firm of Messrs. Hammond, Turner & Sons, one of the most important houses and one of the oldest house in the trade, estimated that about 6,000 people were then occupied in the industry. No one could possibly have known more about the trade than Mr. Turner did. He estimates there were 1,200 people engaged in metal button making ; that about 1,500 people found employment in the production of covered buttons, including linen ; at least 2,000 were associated with the pearl button interest ; that 700 were engaged in the production of buttons from vegetable ivory ; that about 600 would be associated in turning out buttons from glass, bone, horn, wood, etc. ; that gives a total of 6,000. The largest button works in Birmingham at that time belonged to Mr. William Aston, of Princip Street. William Aston was a well-known character ; he was a great sporting man and indeed was extraordinarily popular in social circles in Birmingham. The writer has heard his father tell tales of a party which went to Chester to see the race for the Chester Cup in 1853 when it was won by Mr. Palmer's Goldfinder, the party consisting of the writer's progenitor, Mr. William Aston, the then Chaplain of the Birmingham Gaol, and Mr. Palmer. And it is worthy of note that the Mr. Palmer was William Palmer, the Rugeley poisoner ! William Aston was possibly the best known figure in Birmingham at that time. At the Princip

Street factory there were between 700 and 800 workmen. The next largest firms were Messrs. Dain, Watts & Manton, Messrs. Hammond, Turner & Sons, and Messrs. Smith and Wright. But it is difficult indeed for anyone to do more than estimate the number of hands engaged, as the firms then employed so many out-workers. There were quite a considerable number of firms which had no actual manufactory, but who financed, or to use a common term, ran a number of small makers. Birmingham was then a city of out-workers and particularly was this practice associated with the pearl button trade.

Of these 6,000 workers, quite 4,000 and possibly more were women and children, and unfortunately the conditions governing the trade were far from ideal. A Government Commissioner, who published a special report about this time in regard to the conditions obtaining in the industry, draws some very appalling pictures of the condition of these workers. Unfortunately there were always phases of the button trade which scarcely allowed of the payment of substantial wages to skilled men, and therefore it was that labour was often recruited from women and children, and it would not be wise to inquire too closely into the conditions prevailing in the homes of some of the out-workers ; one fears that there were many juvenile slaves and much sweated labour among women incidental to the production of the cheaper grades of buttons. But one must be careful not to libel one of Birmingham's most important industries, because, while sweated labour undoubtedly existed in some phases of the trade, many branches of it had reason to be proud of the respectability and general intelligence of its artisans. The writer chanced to spend a great deal of his time as a boy in what was possibly the most high-grade factory

in the trade ; it belonged to an old and honoured Birmingham firm, which is still, by the way, in existence, which obtained the cream of the contracts for military and naval ornaments, and the buttons they produced for the various crack regiments were of magnificent workmanship and finish. But then their price by the dozen would probably be infinitely more than the price to-day by the gross, because there was a great deal of real craftsmanship necessary to turn out their products. The men in that factory were looked upon as among the aristocrats of Birmingham artisans, and, whatever the information may be worth, it is a fact that a considerable proportion of them used to go to work in top hats. But then stamping, burnishing, piercing, and chasing were skilled operations. In those days one of the most important operations was the attaching of the shank to the button. This is now done automatically with an ease that would amaze workmen of that generation. Each shank of a high-class military button in those days used to have to be soldered to the body of the button by the aid of flux and a blow-pipe. Similarly, in the production of the pearl button a considerable amount of skill was necessary, and the rate of remuneration in the higher grade branches of the trade was decidedly good. Wages would vary from £2 to £4 a week according to the quality of the work done ; but the average of course, was very much lower and would probably not exceed 25s. a week when trade was merely moderately good. Women's wages varied from 16s. to 20s. a week in the high-grade establishments, but were often as low as from 7s. to 9s. on low grade work, and girls and young children were frequently paid as low as 1s. 6d. to 1s. Unfortunately, and it would to-day be a matter for righteous indignation, many children used to be engaged in the work when they were only six years

old, and plenty of youngsters between six and twelve used to wait on the older hands, or do work of a merely elementary character.

The Birmingham button trade, it may be said, received special attention at the hands of the authorities in the year 1864, or just previous to that year, when an official inquiry was held as to the legitimacy or otherwise of applying a proposed factory act to Birmingham. A Government Commissioner, Mr. J. E. White, conducted an enquiry and his report is embodied in a blue book of 1864. It is to the credit of the trade that all the leading employers deplored the evils resulting from the employment of very young children, and the majority of them quite earnestly gave it as their belief that legislation of some kind on the subject might very advantageously be introduced. One of the chief difficulties, of course, lay in regard to the use of out-workers, who would habitually work at a price at which the ordinary employee could not live. So much labour in the button trade was done by women that unfortunately many of the evils incident to such employment in those days, at any rate, were rife, and when Mr. White held his enquiry Mr. Turner particularly drew his attention to what was a common practice—married women, either with or without children, working in button factories. His evidence was to the effect that what normally happened was this. A girl entered a factory, acquired a certain amount of skill in her work, and became the recipient of from 8s. to 10s. a week. This was a very useful addition to the gross income of the family while she was a member of the home circle, and in so far as it enabled her to form habits of industry it was by no means disadvantageous. Then she married, but, far too often instead of leaving her work and making her husband's comfort her chief desire, she could not resist the

temptation of adding to their income by continuing at her work. The neglected home and the neglected husband were of course, natural sequels : then with the advent of children the necessity for increased income seemed to be imperative, and so the child or children were put in the charge of a hireling neighbour.

The picture is a true one, and Mr. Turner's experience was that the women's wages were rarely one-third of those earned by men and therefore in many cases, at any rate, might have been legitimately sacrificed. In addition he was quite convinced that many husbands were directly encouraged to pursue lives of idleness or comparative idleness because of the supplementary income produced by the industrial activity of the wife. He admitted that there were some exceptions to this rule, but he was not at all favourable to the unrestricted employment of females in the industry. Without doubt in some of the smaller works where less skilled hands were engaged the remuneration paid was very low. But then some of the operations were very elementary ; for instance, in factories where vegetable ivory buttons were made, the nuts had to be cracked ready for the workmen whose duty it was to saw them up. This primeval operation was always done by little boys, who were very appropriately called nut-crackers, and, as the propensities of boys of the age favoured would naturally be destructive, perhaps such work was not inappropriately in their hands. However, it is exceedingly pleasing to know that juvenile labour has had its day ; there must have been thousands of little slaves at that time ; but probably even their lot was preferable to the lot of the juvenile mill hands in the Lancashire cotton district.

## CHAPTER X

### BIRMINGHAM BUTTONS : SOME INTERESTING REFERENCES

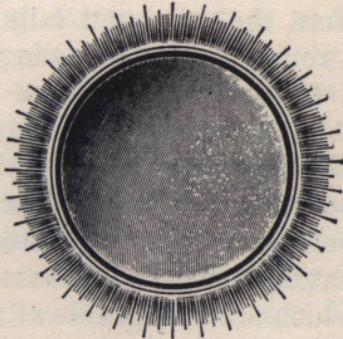
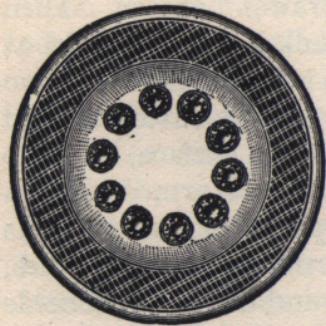
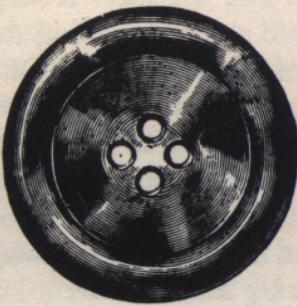
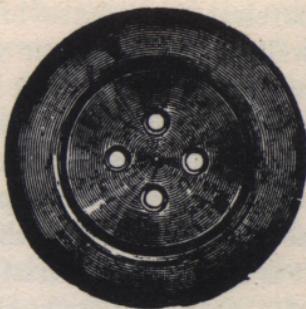
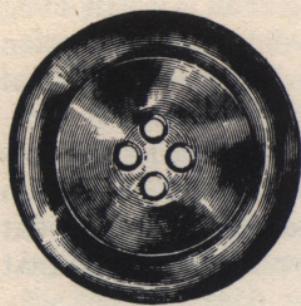
WHILE it is not easy to set forth indisputable facts in regard to the button trade in Birmingham before the beginning of last century, it is very certain that the trade always flourished here, and one source of information is the Birmingham Directory of 1780. In this directory there is rather a novel article upon Birmingham manufacturers, and the writer says, speaking of course, of that time and probably letting his memory run back some years, "It would be no easy task to enumerate the infinite diversity of buttons manufactured here ; it may be sufficient to observe that those made of gold, silver, steel, pearl, paper, etc., are universally allowed to excel the produce of any other place in this country and are, it must be admitted, finished with all the richness and splendour of which they are capable. There is one sort of button which, on account of its having been produced by an artist of eminence in this town, deserves particular attention. It is that which is inlaid with divers other metals ; was first attempted about twenty years ago and then, though in no respects so complete as at present, met with great and merited encouragement." Then the writer goes on to give some very interesting and valuable details of the methods of producing buttons, and it is all the more valuable in that it is, of course, the work of a contemporary writer. He says, "The button consisted of one solid piece of metal ; the ornaments upon the face of it were the work of an engraver ; to give despatch to the execution of

its manufacturer and to render it more advantageous to the manufacturer, various instruments were invented, some of which were either solely produced or greatly improved by Birmingham artists. Many others, the press, the stamp and the engine for turning the mould, deservedly ought to be mentioned. The first gives form to the button and the second to objects presented to it, but the engine, which was the invention of a man of great mechanical knowledge, was perhaps not the least acquisition of the three : for inconceivable despatch was introduced ; and the formation of the mould was now effected with surprising ease and expedition. But what most enhanced the importance of the discovery was that the bones and hoofs of beasts, which till this period had been thought articles of little or no value, became articles of great consequence in the manufacture of buttons and were imported into this kingdom in large quantities from Ireland and other places."

There appeared in *Household Words* of 1852, at the time that that famous and well-known journal was conducted by Charles Dickens, rather a pathetic picture—and indeed a damning indictment—of the Birmingham button trade. The article was entitled "What There is in a Button," and here is the description of a typical Birmingham factory. "We see hundreds of women, scores of children and a few men ; first, rows of women sit each at her machine with its handle in her right hand and a sheet of thin iron, brass, or copper in the other ; shifting the sheet she punches out circles many times faster than the cook cuts out shapes from a sheet of pastry. The number cut out and pushed aside per minute is beyond belief to those who have not seen it done. By the same method rough paste-board is cut and linen (double, coarse and fine) for shirt buttons ; and silk and satin ;—in short, all the round parts of all

buttons. The remains are sold to the foundries, ragmen, and paper-makers. Very young children gather up the cut circles ; little boys ' just out of the cradle ' range the paste-board circles and pack them close on edge in boxes or trays, and girls as young range on a table linen circles small and large. That may have made for economic output, but there is no suggestion of the dignity of labour about it."

The author, by the way, gives a very fine description of the beauty—and the present writer well remembers when the product of a high-class button factory was as artistic as anything in the country—of many of the stamped buttons produced in Birmingham factories of that day. He says, " The most interesting and beautiful button of all, however, depends on the skill of men employed elsewhere ;—die-sinkers. There is a series of stamped buttons gilt or silvered, which one may go and see as one would so many pictures—that sort of badge called sporting buttons. Members of a hunt or of any sporting association distinguished themselves by wearing these pretty miniature pictures ; here a covey of partridges with almost every feather indicated in the high finish ; there a hound clearing a hedge ; now a group of huntsmen and pack ; and again a fishing net meshing the prey, or the listening stag or bounding fawn. In these small specimens of art the details are as curious a composition as skilful ; the life of the living as vivid and the aspect of the dead as faithful as if the designer were busy on a wine-cup for a king instead of a button for a sporting badge. Here there must be a dead ground ; there a touch of burnish ; here a plain ground but there a plaided or radiating one ; but everywhere the most perfect finish that talent and care can give. There is surely something charming in seeing the smallest things done so thoroughly as if to remind the



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careless that whatever is worth doing at all is worth doing well. We no longer wonder as we did, that the button branch is one of the most advanced in the business of the die-sinker and medallist." It would not be surprising to find that that was written by Charles Dickens himself, because he paid several visits to Birmingham about the date that that article appeared. In any event it is a very finely written one ; the work is obviously that of a practised journalist.

A very interesting article on the Birmingham Button Trade appeared in *The Leisure Hour*, 1853, and the writer gives a graphic and interesting description of the method of production of that date. Of course, it differs materially from the almost whirlwind operations incident to the production of buttons to-day, but the description he gives is worth more than a passing glance. He describes the metal as being rolled into strips of about 5 ft. in length and as many inches in width, which is cut into circular blanks by a female at a small hand press. She depresses the punch, he says, some thirty or forty times a minute, and every time a blank or disc is cut from the strip and falls into a drawer beneath. Then a rounded edge is given to the blank by a young girl at a table, who forces the blank to revolve between two steel plates having concave edges. If the button instead of being a flat one is to have a convex surface, it has to be subjected to pressure from a press armed with a polished concave surface. He speaks of the press as having only to be armed with the appropriate dies, which are changeable at pleasure, and the work proceeds with characteristic rapidity. Some of the buttons which are stamped with deeper cut dies, or have to receive impressions on both sides, require extra force of pressure and these are stamped by men. Then the writer goes on to describe shell buttons ; that is, buttons formed of

two pieces of metal, the one called the shell and the other the button ; the two parts are brought into contact by a single pressure. Then comes a description of the then primitive method of affixing the shanks. The shanks, he says, are bought from the shank maker, who can supply them much cheaper than the button maker can make them. The shanking is performed by a woman who, laying the buttons on their backs places the shank in the centre of each, retaining them in their places by small iron clips or springs. She now, with a little solder, touches the part where the shank and button unite, and when a batch of them are thus prepared they are exposed in an oven to a heat which melts the solder, and the work is done. He also describes the art of silvering or gilding and gives an interesting description of the old method of burnishing ; he says : " The finishing process is accomplished in a lathe, and, of course, is the work of a man, occasionally assisted by a boy to turn the wheel. Taking the buttons in his left hand, he inserts one in the hollow of a chuck turned to fit it ; an agreeable half-musical twang is heard as he applies the polishing blood-stone to the rapidly revolving surface, and in a few seconds a deep and brilliant polish is produced."

The writer further gives an interesting description of the production of the pearl button. The first operation, after cleansing the shell, is cutting the blanks, which is done by a tubular saw worked in a lathe. In many pearl buttons, he says, a shank of metal is inserted ; but this is not soldered, nor can any adhesive composition be used, so an ingenious device is resorted to. The shank is split below its ring into the form of an inverted V. Then the turner cuts at the back of the button a hole much wider at the bottom than at the orifice. He inserts the shank at the aperture, and a sharp tap with a hammer causes the V-shaped wire to spread out flat,

and shank and button are inseparably fastened together. Speaking of certain other classes of buttons, the writer says, that not a few of these are made at a cost at which no manufacturer who had to pay wages could produce them. The trade in these fancy goods is in the hands of a number of small independent masters with whom it would be hopeless for the capitalist to compete ; the existence of these small masters, who were technically denominated garret masters, is an anomaly in the working world. They are a singular class of being who prefer their personal freedom to every other consideration, and will submit to every deprivation except that of liberty. The regular toil of the journeyman under the master's eye and the discipline of the workshop are more hateful to them than the lowest poverty ; rather than enter a workshop, they will labour at their own miserable homes for half the remuneration of the regular journeyman, and as a body they have done more to reduce the wages of labour in many departments of manufacture than all the vicissitudes of the market or the strikes of artisans. It is worthy of note that the Birmingham button trade suffered very considerably as the result of the existence of these garret masters.

## CHAPTER XI

### A TRENCHANT CRITIC

CONSIDERING that nothing suggestive of a history of the button trade has ever been written, it is remarkable how many fugitive references there are to it in Birmingham journals and pamphlets of a hundred years ago. Thus there are to be found in the Birmingham Reference Library a series of articles written by "Job Nott, Buckle Maker, and Cousin to Jacob Nott, the well-known Button Burnisher." These articles are full of lamentation: assuredly Job Nott had a hive of bees in his bonnet, and he makes every grievance a matter of national or world-wide application and consequence. He publishes a skit on a trial at the Birmingham Assizes (which were not held until a century and a half after, by the way) of a button maker who made gilt buttonps without the use of gold. Job Nott churns himself into a great state of excitement over the delinquencies of the accused. "The trade of gold and silver lace was lost," he says, "to this country by just such practices as the defendant had been guilty of, and so the French got the trade, but that by a similar Act of Parliament to this Button Act it has been happily restored to this country." Then the writer declares that "it was nonsense to talk of the liberty to make a bad article being beneficial to the country: on the contrary, it was in the end destructive of the commerce of every country: that foreigners would not come again where they had once been cheated: that, as to destroying the confidence between master and man, it ought to be destroyed if the master had acted a roguish part, and put on 'Treble gilt' where the button was not even double gilt; and it was not the

duty of servants to connive at fraud. If masters were permitted to carry on such practices, and apprentice boys and young men witness it, can there be a greater encouragement to swerve from the path of virtue? Is it not to be feared that such apprentices and servants will not only follow their masters' trades, but their frauds also, to the destruction of their own character and the commerce of the country?"

It is worthy of note that the accused button maker was brought in guilty, and fined £550 "besides cost and suit."

In another article, the same trenchant critic, after describing how rife fraudulent practices were in the boot trade—even then soles of brown paper were not unknown—again returns to the attack on these villainous gilt button makers. He says: "Now methinks the case is just the same, or rather worse, when a man in open defiance of an Act of Parliament has the impudence not only to make buttons without gold and call them gilt, and absolutely make every button go a lying into foreign countries with Gilt, Gilt, Gilt, wrote all over its backside, without a bit of gold on its face. These may be called brazen-fronted buttons, and not only Guilt, but extra Guilt, and Birmingham Guilt. Birmingham Guilt, indeed. And this is the way, Cousin, in which poor Birmingham is become a proverb and a bye-word, and a place of reproach for all to exercise their wit upon who write about it. Nobody now-a-days can write about Birmingham without sneering at us."

Then follows what the author styles—

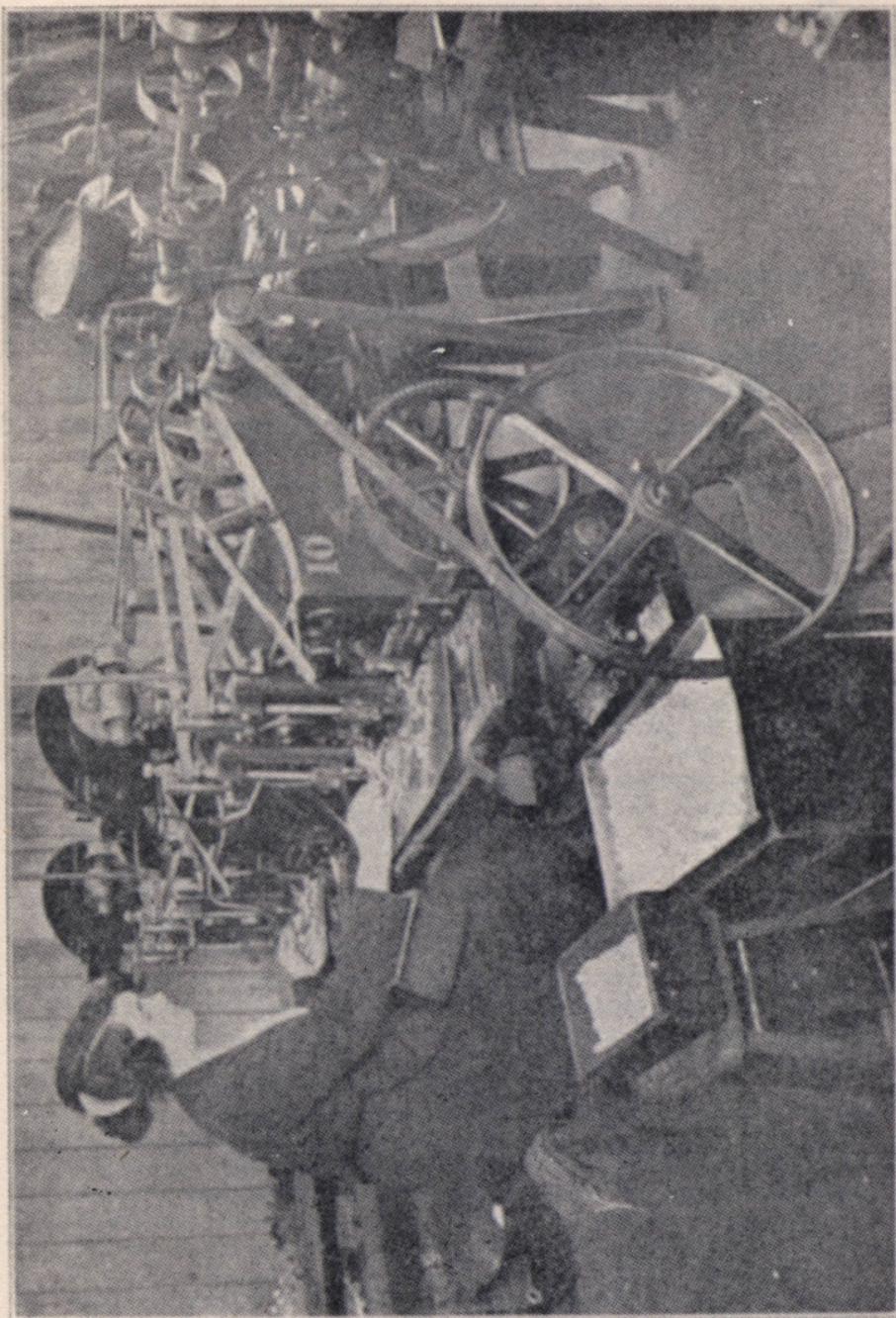
An Epigram on the vending of Counterfeit Gilt Buttons instead of the real article—

"That Guilt is punishment to fear,  
It stands on reason's ground;  
But, where no Gilt did 'eer appear,  
Who can be guilty found?"

Buttons, Ltd., Birmingham

DRILLING IVORY BUTTONS

By permission of



" Then on what ground, Logicians, say,  
Is this strange doctrine built?  
That Button Gilders Guilt betray,  
In works quite free from Gilt.

" For, if by want of Gilt they show  
How much to Guilt they're prone,  
'Tis passing strange that Guilt should flow  
From Giltless works alone."

Clearly our forefathers did not mince their words :  
they did not glorify the evil-doer and insinuate that he  
was a smart man.

## CHAPTER XII

### AN APPEAL TO THE SOVEREIGN

REFERENCE has often been made to the deputation of operative button makers to the King and Queen. An account of this is to be found in *The Morning Herald* of 2nd Sept., 1830, and it is distinctly interesting: here is a reproduction of the description given—

#### GRACIOUS CONDESCENSION OF THE KING AND QUEEN TO THE WORKING CLASSES.

On Thursday last a deputation of the operative button-makers of Birmingham, attended by a professional gentleman, their secretary, arrived at Windsor, and had the honour of presenting to His Majesty at Windsor Castle, a petition from the trade signed by a vast number of the operatives; and also of presenting to the King and Queen various sets of plain gilt and plated buttons (which were enclosed in morocco leather cases and the Royal arms embossed in gold thereon) of the richest manufacture. The deputation was received at the Castle with the utmost respect, and their Majesties expressed themselves highly gratified with the presents. Sir Herbert Taylor read the memorial, of which the following is a copy, to the King—

To the KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTY,

The humble petition of the operative manufacturers of plain gilt and plated buttons, residing in Birmingham.

SIRE.—We are in the deepest distress for want of employment and we know of no mode of obtaining relief but by an appeal to your Majesty. We are full of hope from your gracious condescension, and from the repeated evidences of the sympathy of your Majesty with the people.

In the month of February last great and successful efforts were made by a deputation from Birmingham to induce the great personages of the State to wear plain metal buttons, and his late Majesty most graciously set the example to the country at large, which was followed by many illustrious Nobles and Commoners, and our trade greatly revived. The lamented illness and death of his late Majesty suddenly obscured our bright hopes, and the trade of plain buttons, which depends for its prosperity on the

prevailing fashion of the polite world, was precipitated into its present deplorable condition.

SIRE.—Our only hope now is in the condescension of your Majesty and we humbly appeal to our gracious and benevolent Prince, that he will condescend to accept the humble token of our loyalty which accompanies the petition, and wear the same, with the kind purpose of inducing the beau monde to follow your Majesty's illustrious example.

SIRE.—By a compliance with this humble petition, your Majesty will give bread to thousands of your subjects whose gratitude and loyalty can only be exceeded by the virtues and benevolence of their gracious Sovereign; and your Majesty's petitioners, as in duty bound, etc

The King with great affability said that he admired the old English fashion of gilt and plated buttons, and always wore them himself, except when he was in mourning, and although there were nearly 150 letters to answer, yet he would send a written reply to the memorial on the following day. The Royal word was faithfully kept, and the next day the following letter was received from His Majesty's Secretary—

Windsor Castle, 27th August, 1830.

Sir, I have been honoured with the King's commands to acknowledge the receipt of the petition signed by Mr. W. H. Bland, and other operative manufacturers of plain gilt and plated buttons, residing in Birmingham, accompanied by sets of buttons which you are desirous his Majesty should wear as an inducement to others to wear such; and his Majesty orders me to assure you of the deep interest he takes in the prosperity of your trade, and in the welfare of those engaged in it, and that his Majesty will have much pleasure in complying with your request when the mourning shall have expired.

I am, Sir, Your most obedient humble servant,  
H. TAYLOR.

To E. Edmonds, Esq.,  
Clements-Inn-Chambers, Strand.  
Secretary to the Deputation.

Her Majesty, Queen Adelaide, also expressed herself in the most condescending manner when she received the present, and on the next day, the following interesting letter, written at Her Majesty's dictation by her



*By permission of*

*Buttons, Ltd., Birmingham*

**CUTTING PEARL BLANKS**

Treasurer, was transmitted by order of Her Majesty to the Secretary of the Deputation—

Windsor Castle, 27th August, 1803.

Sir, Having had the honour to submit to the Queen the memorial of the manufacturers of metal buttons of Birmingham, together with the specimens of habit buttons offered for the approbation of her Majesty, I am commanded to signify to you, that impressed as her Majesty is at all times with a desire of encouraging generally the manufactures of the kingdom, and now of reviving the use of an article of so much importance to Birmingham as that of metal buttons, her Majesty is graciously pleased to accept and admire the buttons intended for the use of her Majesty, presented by the deputation of button manufacturers.

I am, Sir, Your most obedient servant,

JOHN BARTON.

To E. Edmonds, Esq.,

Clements Inn Chambers, Strand.

The Princes George of Cumberland and George of Cambridge also accepted sets of buttons, and subsequently the following letter was received from Windsor Castle—

Windsor, 29th August, 1830.

Sir, Your letter of the 27th inst., accompanied with a packet of buttons as specimens of the Birmingham manufacture, and presents to the persons to whom they were respectively addressed I have received and distributed. For myself, I am to return you my sincere thanks with an assurance that the interest which I naturally feel in promoting the manufactures of my country, and particularly those of Birmingham, which have so strong a claim upon a mechanical man, will not be lost sight of—and I have no doubt the like feeling will be excited in the minds of their Royal Highnesses Prince George of Cumberland and Prince George of Cambridge, as well as of Sir Herbert Taylor, who are in possession of your presents.

I am, Sir, your most obedient servant,

JOHN BARTON.

To Mr. E. Edmonds.

It is worthy of remark that this is the first time the working classes ever presented a petition to the King, except through the Secretary of State for the Home Department.

## CHAPTER XIII

### SOME FOREIGN COMPETITORS

IT would be illusory to assume, however, that Birmingham or indeed Great Britain enjoyed a monopoly of the button-making world. Various classes of buttons have always been made in practically every country in the world, but very often their production has been on a restricted scale. Each country has its own preferences and idiosyncrasies, and therefore it is that small quantities of buttons have always been produced where they were most required. But the industry seemed to have particular charm for the French people and the trade there was developed upon very sound and admirable lines. During the middle of last century Paris was the great centre of the button trade of France, and one of the chief centres of the button trade of the world, although they had their specialities, and those specialities differed rather from the important specialities favoured in this country. Still, Paris was in competition with Birmingham in many lines. Button-making was also fairly general at Lyons ; Germany produced fancy buttons, especially of the cheaper types, at Elberfeld and in many parts of the Rhenish provinces of Prussia. Millions of cheap fancy glass buttons were produced in Bohemia, while Vienna at one time had a pearl-button output which almost rivalled that of Birmingham, and indeed knocked Birmingham quite out of the market in regard to certain products. Then Milan had its own special makes, but the rest of Europe, to speak generally, looked to England and to the other nations here mentioned for their general supplies ;

their own specialities they were disposed to produce themselves, but nowhere else did button-making exist on a very intensive scale.

America had its button manufactories comparatively early, and produced even then upon a very large scale. Her production must indeed have been very great or else had immense possibilities about it, for we find that when the Civil War between the North and South broke out the Northern States, who must have experienced a very sudden demand for military and naval buttons, were able to supply all her own needs. The American button manufacturers undoubtedly had a very active time then, but no call was made for European supplies, rather to the amazement of the Birmingham button makers, be it said. However, the various button-making firms of Europe found a little consolation in being called upon to provide the whole needs of the Southern States, although they had to pursue the not unpopular process of running the blockade to do so. But then, Birmingham firms always took quite a joyful pride in running the blockade, and one has heard old members of the small arms trade in the city tell most diverting tales of the stirring times they had in running that same blockade with arms. It was said at one time that, whenever there was a war on, Birmingham manufacturers yearned to supply both belligerents with all they required, and, if one cargo went, well the profits on the next would be quite sufficient to compensate for the confiscation of the first.

One of the American specialities at that time was the vulcanized rubber button, which, although it seemed to have had a certain amount of popularity in the States, was never enthusiastically received in England or indeed Europe. Vulcanized rubber buttons had rather a peculiar odour, which, while it may not have

offended the olfactory organs in the States—of that generation, at any rate—was rather repugnant to the British sense of smell. As a matter of fact, up to that time the United States did very little export trade here, or indeed in Europe ; they used to import from this country an immense number of buttons of types they were not accustomed to manufacture, but we were not greatly troubled with their competition. The competition we had and, in certain periods after the duties on buttons had been removed by Sir Robert Peel, and the foreigner had a completely open market here, the continental competition was exceptionally severe and many protests were made in regard to it. At this particular time, 1864-5, France had quite as many people engaged in the button industry as we had in Birmingham, and when one says France one practically means Paris. There, as here, they had a large number of small makers, but in Paris at the time mentioned there were engaged in the metal button trade, to use this in a rather cosmopolitan sense, 2,800 people, while 1,800 were employed in the covered button trade and about 2,000 as workers in bone, pearl and horn. Then in addition there were about 2,000 people engaged in vegetable ivory and wood buttons at various places roughly within fifty miles of Paris, while quite 1,000 were producing sewn silk buttons at Apremont, which is close to Chantilly. The famous porcelain buttons of which so much has been heard, and for which the French had an unrivalled reputation, were made at Briare and Montereau, which are about sixty miles from Paris. A very famous maker, M. Bapterosse, in his factory at Briare, had at least 1,000 workpeople, while another 4,000 and even more outworkers were associated with the production of his factory. An enormous number of people within a radius of roughly twenty

miles, all of them women and children, used to card or sew on buttons, or fix the shanks, an operation which then involved manual labour. At Montereau about 300 hands were employed with about the same average number of outworkers. By the way, at this time at least 2,000 people were employed in the production of buttons of various classes in the prisons of France. It would seem at first sight economic and sensible to use prison labour in a remunerative way, but it is nevertheless a fact that such a policy has always evoked clamorous protests from firms and workpeople upon whose prerogatives they have been accused of trenching.

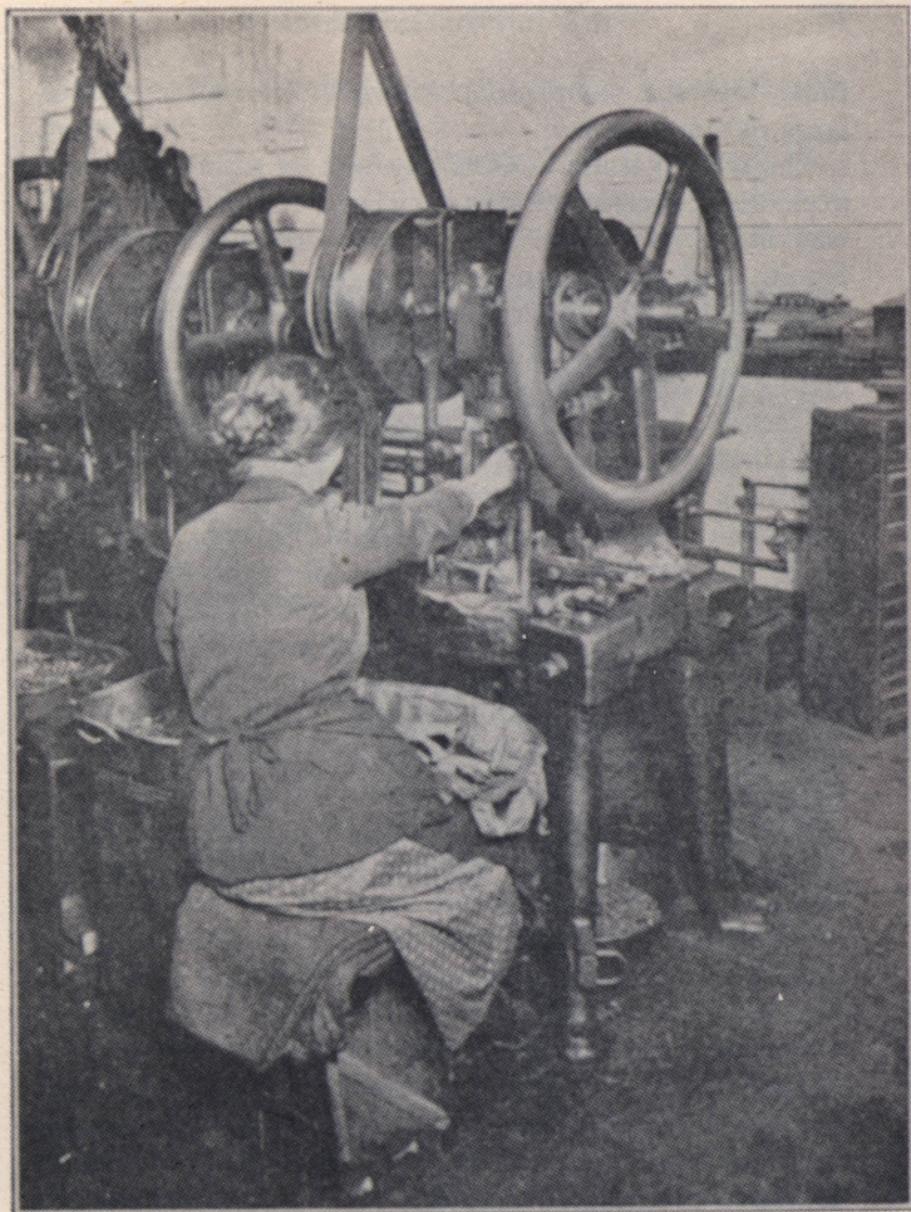
It will, therefore, be seen on what an extensive scale button-making was conducted in Paris and its sphere of influence in the middle of last century. At Lyons the production was mainly represented by very cheap buttons and employment was found there for quite 2,000 people, so that, all told, the French industry at that time found employment for 20,000 people, a practical proof that it developed at a much greater pace than was the case here ; for, if you allow the regular industry another thousand people to include those engaged in the trade in London and every other part of the country, you will probably have summed up the whole of the people wedded to the industry. Clearly, the industry went right ahead in France, for it is a fact that, while in 1840 far more buttons were exported from England to France than were imported from France to this country, in the sixties quite a different state of things prevailed ; with the exception of a few linen buttons made in Birmingham for shirts, practically no Birmingham buttons were sold in France, at any rate, in any appreciable quantities, and in the production of really good fancy buttons France fairly held sway ; they could hold their

own markets with comparative ease and also invade ours and other markets.

There were several causes which contributed to this state of things ; to begin with, the French nation have always enjoyed a reputation for the possession of artistic skill and good taste, and it is not surprising to find that they have devoted their national characteristics to a trade which gave peculiar scope for the exercise of their special gifts. One would expect the French to excel in the production of fancy buttons, for instance. But that is not the only asset they have enjoyed ; generally speaking, they have had the advantage of a considerably lower rate of remuneration than the British maker has had to pay, although as we have seen the remuneration given here was low enough. The French maker has also unquestionably had the advantage of cheaper raw material ; then again the French have not only had a very much wider market, for geographically the position of Paris is ideal, but they have benefited greatly by the action of British politicians in abolishing all duties on imported buttons. This left Great Britain absolutely open to the foreign manufacturer, while in most places at any rate tariffs were raised against imports from this country. Then Paris has always been the acknowledged centre of the world of fashion, and has always been universally visited by those who desired to replenish their stocks of goods for millinery, dressmaking or tailoring purposes. While they were there for the purpose of acquiring stocks of the type indicated, they were naturally disposed to accept the prevailing fashions in regard to buttons, more particularly as it is only fair to assume that those buttons would harmonize in many ways with the materials they had acquired. And so it came about that Paris became the popular centre of button production. It is true that buyers from the

New World were apt to come to London and even to Birmingham for many goods, and both in Birmingham and in London they would see products of Birmingham button manufacture thoroughly well represented ; but we could not boast that we had such a market for our wares, of this particular type at any rate, as Paris had.

Then it will not be surprising to hear that the French button trade was aided, and aided materially, by the existence of a number of exceedingly talented business men who chanced to give this particular trade their close and undivided attention. Every trade has its period of activity and passivity ; every trade is the better for the arising of capable and far-seeing leaders, and the French button trade was undoubtedly stimulated and greatly stimulated by the organizing ability, artistic perception, and sound common sense of a series of remarkably able commercial magnates. Industries, like countries and periods, have their renaissances, and the French button trade profited very materially as the result of the tangible and practical leads given thereto by its accredited leaders. So far as metal buttons are concerned, and also buttons made from materials such as mother-of-pearl, nuts or hoofs, and in regard to material for covering buttons, with the single exception possibly of silk, Birmingham was able to hold its own when compared with Paris, and that is why Birmingham enjoyed such a supremacy in regard to what we will call the metal button trade. Now in Paris most of the materials had to be imported from England. In Paris at any rate, wages were then rather high but in the country towns of France they were very much lower, and therefore, it was that, while England could give an excellent account of herself in regard to metal buttons, France excelled in the production of fancy kinds, and more particularly



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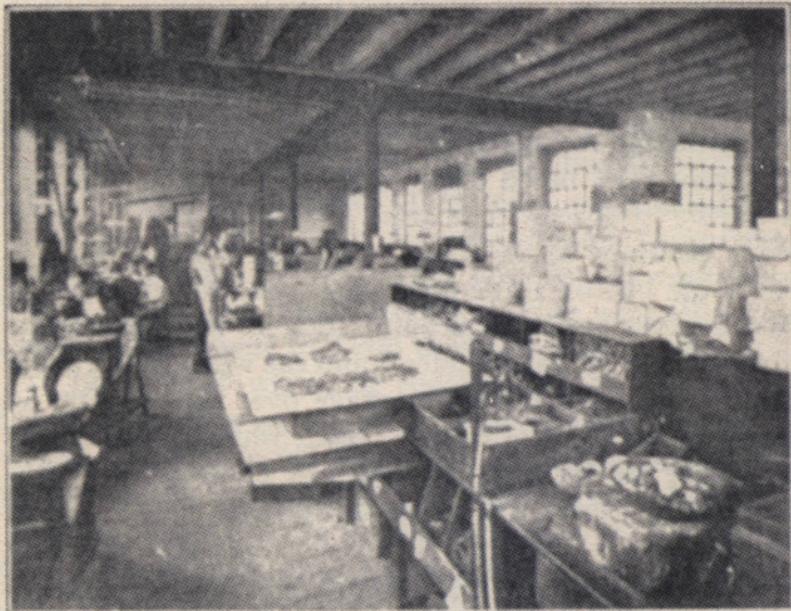
**STAMPING AND PIERCING TROUSER BUTTONS**

those into the composition of which silk entered to a large or small degree.

The button trade in Germany was on rather different lines, but it is certain that a very large volume of business was done. Germany had no great speciality such as France had, for instance, in the porcelain button, but with Teuton thoroughness she managed to produce on a large scale and never had the slightest hesitation, of course, in copying any novelty which another country provided. So far as bulk went, it is unquestionably a fact that the quantity Germany exported to various countries all over the world was far in excess of the combined exports of England and France. But one must not assume from that that the aggregate value was correspondingly high. As a matter of fact Germany all along made a speciality of cheap goods ; true to her traditions in other realms of industry she showed a remarkable capacity for imitating, in cheaper material and with equally inferior finish, expensive articles put upon the market by England and France. The home trade of Germany, of course, has always been exceptionally large ; Germany has never been addicted to the British method of taking the products of other countries when she could supply those products herself : to speak generally, the purchasing public in Germany have been thoroughly patriotic, and as she had the home market to herself it was competent for Germany to produce on a very large scale. Then in addition to supplying the whole of the German states she found a very large number of consumers in Russia, Spain, and Italy ; her market in Russia was especially large, but, in a general way, of course, the class of products called for there was on the cheap side. Germany at times used to send enormous quantities of buttons to this country and she also exported very freely to the United States, and many

distant markets looked to her for at least a considerable percentage of their supplies.

As a matter of fact, Germany's button trade was never organized on the same lavish scale as the French industry, and she could not show such large factories,



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**A VIEW OF A BUTTON FACTORY**

and assuredly could not boast that she used such effective machinery as the English makers. There were no very large firms associated with the trade there, and Germany on the whole was content to produce at almost unreasonably low rates. While, however, their factories were less efficient than ours and also their machinery was unquestionably less perfect, they seemed to have an almost uncanny appreciation of the possibilities of producing reasonable results with a comparatively

small outlay. That is a very great point in any manufacturing nation, and assuredly Germany made it a special study in this particular sphere of her activity.

While it is not possible to find such good data in regard to the extent of the button industry in Germany, it is abundantly clear that there were more persons engaged in the industry in the Elberfeld locality than were engaged therein in Birmingham ; possibly there were not so many button workers there as in France, and it is practically certain that the standards of remuneration were very much lower than those which obtained in Paris : probably they were somewhat akin to those which obtained in the more rural districts of France in which the button trade flourished. In Bohemia, where glass buttons were produced on such an enormous scale, wages were very scanty indeed, and the whole of Germany unquestionably had an advantage over this country in regard to the price of labour. But, while that is a very important matter when it comes to a question of close competition, there are other advantages which tell in an industry of this type, and Germany's greatest asset was her characteristic ingenuity in producing the cheapest article with the best possible appearance. In that respect, Germany undoubtedly created a wonderful trade ; on the other hand, Germany did not shine when contrasted with Great Britain when it came to producing high-grade goods, goods which could be put on the market only as the result of the utilization of tools of a high-grade character allied with workmanship of the most skilful type. As might have been expected too, the Germans proved very dangerous rivals to the British manufacturer by reason of the efficient way in which they organized their trade, and especially in the thorough way in which they organized their selling agencies.

## CHAPTER XIV

### LONDON AND THE BUTTON TRADE

THERE is an interesting reference to the button trade in a manuscript volume in the Birmingham Reference Library. The papers are those of some member of the Bagnall family, and the writer says : " It was a fortunate thing for the good town that the buckle trade, in spite of every fluctuation of fashion, maintained for nearly one hundred years an unexampled prosperity, producing in one lucky twelve months the enormous amount of two and a half million buckles, and affording regular employment to 5,000 workmen ; but it was still more lucky that when, in consequence of the Prince Regent appearing at a ball in shoe strings instead of buckles, the article fell altogether in public estimation, the demand for gilt and fancy buttons increased in such a ratio as fully to make up for the deficit in the buckle trade. So strangely does Fashion rule that at this very time between button makers, shank makers and solderers and warehousemen there are 135 firms now engaged in delivering this one article to the market, while Birmingham cannot boast one solitary buckle-maker. *Sic transit, etc.*

" After a long and arduous life, at his death in 1775, it was found that Mr. Taylor had amassed a fortune of £200,000, a sum he had most fairly earned by his own exertions, coupled with those of the enormous number of workmen he contrived to employ latterly . . . . Need we wonder longer at the almost fabulous stories we meet with on all hands touching the amount of button production ? In 1781, the palmy days of the trade, when

as manufacturers declare now there was some profit to be got out of button making, the value varied from 3d. the gross to 140 guineas.

"In 1818 the art of gilding buttons had arrived at such a pitch of refinement in Birmingham that three pennyworth of gold was made to cover a gross of buttons : these were sold at prices proportionately low." And the writer naively adds : "The experiment of gilding buttons without any gold has been tried."

"Some interesting and peculiar facts relative to the button trade were detailed by Mr. Osler in his examination before the Parliamentary Committee appointed in 1824 to investigate the policy of restricting the free emigration of artists and artisans. He remarked that "previous to the year 1814 upwards of a thousand individuals were employed in Birmingham in the making of a fancy white button, but by an engine; it was a cheap, showy article, and almost the entire produce of the numerous band employed was sent to the Continent. A single artisan, well acquainted with the process of the manufacture, happening to be detained by Buonaparte, stated to the French Government his ability to establish a workshop and produce the button. He was immediately patronized : the trade presently left Birmingham, and France supplied the markets of Europe. Another article called the Bath metal drilled-shank button, of which at one time 20,000 gross per week were made in Birmingham, was lost in the same way."

This same manuscript volume states that it would appear that in the reign of Charles I the button trade was carried on in London, for in a curious scarce book in Harper's Catalogue of the books collected by the celebrated Browne Willis we find the following title page : "Brownists' Conventicle, or an assembly of Brownists,

Separatists, and Nonconformists, as they met together at a private house in Aldgate to hear a learned felt maker, his auditors were button makers, translators, weavers, box makers, with divers other brethren and sisters." The book is printed in black letter.

London has never quite lost its association with the button trade, although it has never rivalled Birmingham as a centre of production. Some little time ago the Queen spent an afternoon in Shoreditch, and received a specially warm welcome from the girls employed in the button industry there. They recently sent Her Majesty an elaborate and interesting souvenir of her visit, and this was accepted, and the Queen sent a message conveying her sincere thanks and admiration for the gift. The idea of the gift came about in an interesting way. As the results of various experiments made in regard to the production of pearl buttons, most delicate and artistic colour lines were obtained, effects infinitely more striking and attractive than anything ever achieved by dyeing or staining. One of the girls in the factory remarked to another how beautiful they were, and the reply was "They are good enough for the Queen to wear." The reply sank deeply into the minds of her hearers, and the outcome was the formation of a small committee to arrange for a gift of the choicest products of the firm to be offered in a case as handsome as its contents.

It was noticed that, when the first British Industries Fair (London) was held, the Queen paid special attention to the products of this firm—the Turret Button Company. At the time of writing, the firm were engaged upon the compilation of a collection illustrating all the recent developments of the inevitable button, for assuredly no article figures so generally in the dress of women and men alike. Mr. H. L. Davis, the chairman

and manager of the company, gave at the time an interesting account of the raw material upon which the company's employees expended their energies. Mother-of-pearl still forms the basis of the material for the buttons they produce, and the firm have in their store rooms sacks and crates of this material, which comes to



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#### SHANKING METAL BUTTONS

them mainly from Western Australia. That is the present source of the finest shells. "For fully a century," said Mr. Davis, "before the introduction of the McKinley Tariff in the United States, the most beautiful buttons the world produced had been made in Birmingham, the home of the old mother-of-pearl button industry." "In many old country houses" he said "the button boxes handed down from past generations of *châtelaines* reveal old pearl buttons of great beauty and artistic merit."

Mr. Davis went on to explain that the introduction of machinery into other branches of the button trade brought about a lowering of the standard of production as well as a reduction of prices. The mother-of-pearl button, however, resisted then, as it does to-day, the application of automatic machinery to its production. The reason of this is quite easy to see when it is realized that no two shells from which the buttons are made are of the same shape, or thickness, or texture.

The shells now used are found in Australia, and are known scientifically as *Margaritifera maxima*—Jameson. They are brought from the pearl fisheries, after being graded and sorted. They have, however, to withstand keen competition from the United States in regard to this material. Unlimited capital is being put into these American businesses, and they make a point of cutting export prices to the lowest. "The shells as one sees them," says a writer, "are beautiful in their pearly opalescence, which sometimes gives effects of pink shading to sunset yellow, or of cold pure white. From Tahiti comes another range of shells which often provide a dark iridescence, and segments of these are now being employed for single pairs of costly buttons such as a lady might transfer from one handsome wrap to another."

The firm in question are now using casein, highly compressed, for some of the prettiest and most effective of their coloured buttons. This was originally a patent of the Germans, and was introduced by them under the name of Galalith, but it was taken in hand by an English firm, materially improved, and then styled "Erinoid." This improved English substance is more susceptible to colouring and shading, and the colouring too is more translucent. "With a centre of the exquisitely tinted lustroid, or of natural light or dark pearl, it gives charming bordered effects." Celluloid is also greatly employed

for buttons, though against it is the fact that its inflammability has not been totally overcome. But it is now possible to obtain effects from metal that are hardly distinguishable from it, and these products are growing popular.

It is worthy of note that about 1880 it was estimated that the chief button manufactories were distributed in and around the towns mentioned, in the following proportions—London, 158 ; Birmingham, 161 ; Paris, 140 ; Brussels, 5 ; Vienna, 37 ; Prague, 49 ; Barmen, 29 ; Ludenschied, 14 ; Elberfeld, 9 ; Hambourg, 5 ; Stuttgart, 6 ; Darnstadt, 3 ; Offenbach-on-Main, 3 ; Lubeck, 2 ; Breslau, 2 ; New York, 19 ; Philadelphia, 13 ; (U.S. had 55 in all), while there were several factories at Lyons and one at Milan.

## CHAPTER XV

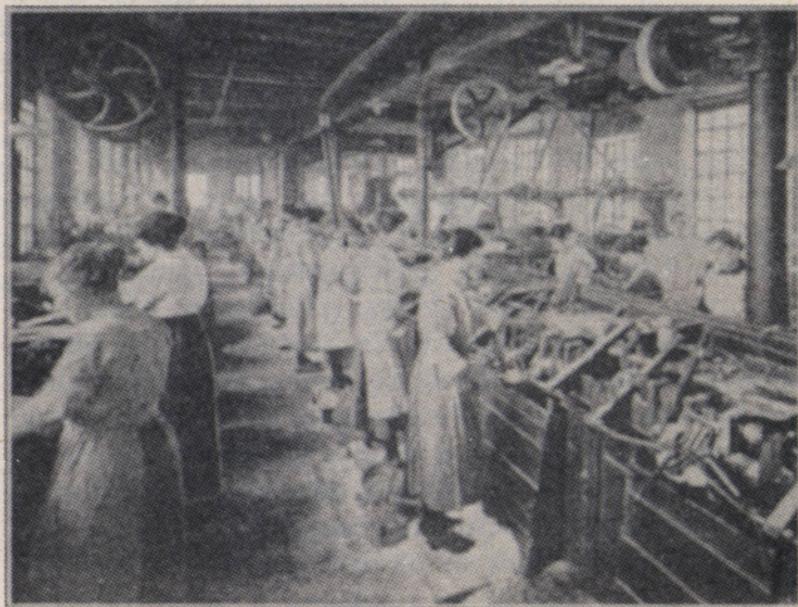
### THE MODERN BUTTON INDUSTRY : A GREAT COMBINE

THE purely modern history of buttons and button-making is illustrated by the history of a Birmingham combine, which came into being in 1907. It was called Buttons, Limited, and was effected by the amalgamation of several of the largest button manufacturing firms in the city. There are those who have small sympathy with combines, but there were conditions existing in connection with the button trade which rendered this particular amalgamation beneficial in every way. For many years, practically since the palmy days of the button trade, there had been undue competition between firms at home, and while they were fighting each other the foreigner was ravaging their interests, and there was a time when it seemed to be quite a likelihood that what had once been a prosperous industry would pass into alien hands.

It was with the idea of obviating this that Buttons, Limited, came into being. The men who promoted the amalgamation were not primarily actuated by the hope of gain, although business men would be looked upon with suspicion were they to declare that they traded with a desire other than that of making profit. But there was a laudable anxiety on the part of the leading members of the trade in Birmingham to bring about conditions which would enable them to meet the foreigner on more equal terms. Before this fusion came about, there was scarcely a British firm of whom it could not be said that they were selling at least some percentage of their goods at a loss, so desperate

was the struggle not only for trade, but for very existence.

The amalgamation was the work of shrewd and far-seeing men, and the constituent parts of the combine consisted of Messrs. Plant, Green & Manton, Ltd., Thomas Carlyle, Limited, and Messrs. Harrison & Smith.



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#### TURNING VEGETABLE IVORY BUTTONS

Mr. J. R. Green, who had for many years been head of the firm of Messrs. Plant, Green & Manton, was made chairman of Buttons, Limited, which had a capital of £400,000, and, in his speech at the meeting when the firm of Messrs. Plant, Green & Manton decided to participate in the amalgamation, he explained that the advantages to be secured by the scheme would include the uniformity of selling prices; the reduction in

heavy stocks ; the utilization for the combine's businesses of the most up-to-date machinery and methods, and the lessening of dead charges. That the scheme was a sound one the history of the company abundantly proves.

Mr. J. R. Green had a wonderful knowledge of the linen button trade ; he was in it for sixty years and invented many of the machine tools used in connection with the industry generally. All these tools, by the way, were made by Buttons, Limited, on their own premises. Buttons, Limited, has an extraordinary range of goods : there is no description of button that is not represented in their output. The buttons are made entirely by the company, and three large factories are kept going, employing several thousands of hands. In the Warstone Lane and Clissold Street factories, linen buttons are principally produced, but the largest works of the firm are in Portland Street, and they are given over entirely to the manufacture of every type of button except the linen button. The processes necessary in the production of buttons of various types are endless ; everywhere you are surrounded by apparently complex cutting, stamping, piercing, drilling, rimming, countersinking and carding machines. Some of the machines which are quite special and, indeed, are to be found nowhere else, perform at least a dozen operations. A large trade is still done in vegetable ivory buttons ; these Corozo nuts, which are found in some of the South American swamps, very much resemble a potato in form and colour, and are as hard as marble. The nuts are cut up by swiftly revolving saws, and then shaped into buttons, and these are polished in shaking mills, which continue their movements day and night.

It is safe to say that Buttons, Limited, have raised the production of buttons to a stage of proficiency never

before known, and the firm are very proud of the unique position they hold. When in 1910 Mr. John R. Green resigned the chairmanship of the company, owing to failing health, his son Mr. Edward H. Green was elected as his successor, and he is still at the head of the firm. Another prominent director is Mr. Walter Evans, J.P., one of the best-known public men in Birmingham.

Probably the oldest house in the trade is that of Firmin & Sons, Ltd. This firm actually dates back to 1677. Its history is of special interest. It is clear that by 1677 button-making was a recognized trade, for in that year one Thomas Firming was known to be established as a button-maker in Three Kings Court, off Lombard Street, in the City of London—a fact confirmed by the oldest printed "List of Names of Merchants in London," issued in or about the year 1677. And from those days till now a Firming, or Firmin as it came to be spelt about the year 1770, has been in the industry and firm.

Later London directories, from 1771 to 1778, tell of "Samuel Firmin, button-maker, near Somerset House," and in 1793 we find him established at No. 153 in the Strand, where the name Firmin appeared as lately as 1894. From 1797 the style of the house was "Firmin & Westall"; in 1812 it was "Philip Firmin," and from 1815 to 1823 it was "Firmin & Langdale." "Firmin & Sons" appears in 1824; and in 1826 the house, then known as Robert Firmin, took additional premises in Clare Court, Drury Lane. After other alterations of style, in 1838 the firm of Firmin & King opened a branch at 13 Conduit Street, Regent Street, adding to the then description of "Button-makers" that of "Sword Cutlers." The next year the house, that of Firmin & Sons, took additional premises at 12 White Horse Yard, Drury

Lane, and added to their description that of "Military Ornament Manufacturers." In 1841 Philip and Samuel Firmin, "Button-makers and Sword Cutlers," carried on at 13 Conduit Street and 153 Strand, blossoming forth in 1848 as "Button, Military and Naval Ornament Manufacturers, and Sword Cutlers to the Queen and Royal Family." In 1853 the firm added the word "wholesale" to the above description, and gave their addresses as at 153 Strand, 13 Conduit Street, 12 White Horse Yard, and 20 Stanhope Street, Clare Market. In 1894 the firm migrated to 108 and 109 St. Martin's Lane, where they continued until a few years ago. To-day their sole Metropolitan habitat is No. 8 Cork Street, London, W.1.

For every set of crested buttons two dies at least have to be cut—one for the coat and one for the vest; of these, Messrs. Firmin hold a stock of some 150,000. As these sets of dies cost anything from four guineas upwards per pair, an idea of the cost of fine button-making can be easily gathered. A final touch: frequently the firm receive single buttons, sent from different parts of the world, with inquiries as to the history, the meaning of the embossed figure, the date of issue, etc., of the original set to which that particular button belonged. Service buttons and badges form the subject of collecting by amateurs; whole books have appeared on the subject of buttons and badges, and interesting reading they make.

Mr. Firmin has in his possession a most interesting volume written by Captain Luis Fenollosa Emilio, of the United States Volunteers, concerning the Emilio collection of military buttons now to be found in the Museum of the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass. There are ten plates illustrating 240 important specimens, and the author spent many years in hunting up rare

military buttons, many of them being recovered from old battle fields; the clothing had perished, but the buttons remained. Antique shops in many countries were also scoured.

Other firms have interesting histories. Jennens & Co., Bridge Row, Deritend, Birmingham, are an old and historic house, especially in the naval and military button trade. Then the firm which originated with Mr. Sanders, whose name has frequently occurred in the earlier portion of the work, still exists at Bromsgrove, near Birmingham, whence it was removed because people in Birmingham were so inquisitive as to the firm's methods. This is the oldest covered button business in the world, and was established in 1800. The firm of J. and R. Gaunt, Ltd. (late Edward Thurkle), was established 200 years ago. The firm of Hammond, Turner & Sons, Ltd., actually goes back to 1717—over two centuries ago—the business being established in Snow Hill, Birmingham.

The firm has a record on the human side which would not easily be paralleled. Several employees have been with the firm for over half a century, and one, a woman worker, has sixty years to her credit. Five workpeople aggregate a length of service of over 280 years. In one department the workers, male and female, are nearly all members of the same family. A mechanic of sixty or thereabouts claims that he has been there ever since he was a fortnight old. His mother was a worker in the factory, and there the child used to be taken each day.

Even the caretaker has an interesting story to tell, and in describing the genealogical tree, is able to point out that his father, his grandfather and his great-grandfather, were all watchmen and caretakers before him in the service of the same employers. "My

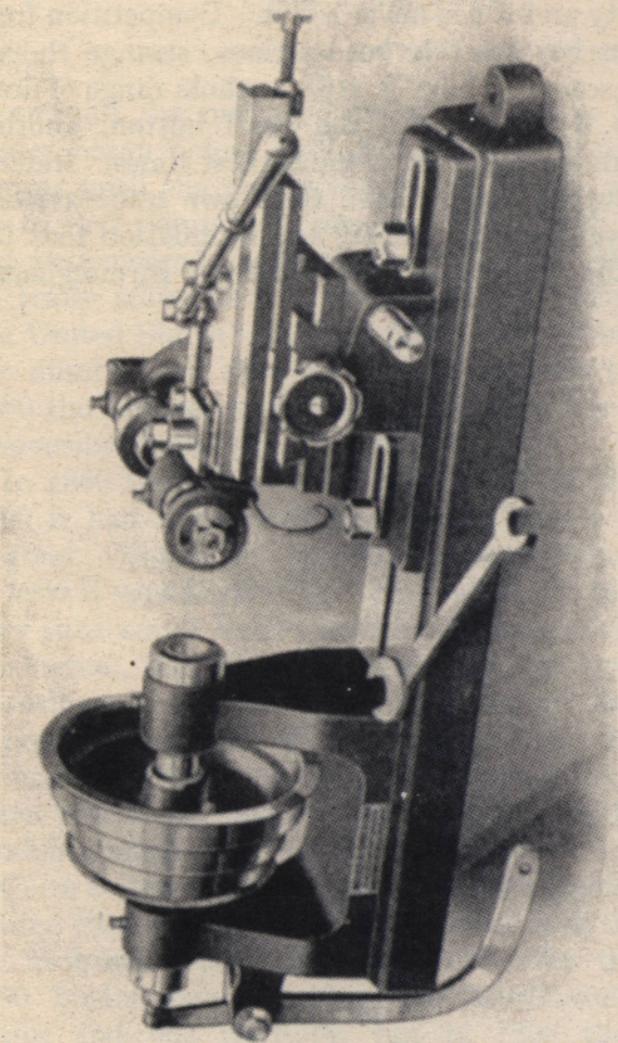
grandfather," he says, "was here for 54 years, my father gave 45 years' service, and I've been here 52 years myself—that's 151 years altogether." This pride in length of service speaks well for the conditions under which the employees work.

During the last twenty years the button trade has altered very materially. Whereas, during the old days, metal trouser buttons were used by every tailor, and it was quite the exception to find an ivory button, now the metal button has to a certain extent been given up, and ivory buttons are used in their place. But during the war very large numbers of metal trouser buttons were made, and every button maker in Birmingham sold as many as he could turn out. Indeed, not only were the recognized button makers busy, but any man who had a few drop stamps used them in the production of buttons. In the old days the metal trouser buttons were all made on drop stamps : now they are produced by heavy power presses, and this method greatly facilitates their production. Only very small quantities are still made upon the drop stamps.

The military side of the button trade altered very much in 1914. The Government practically gave up using all special regimental buttons, and confined themselves to the universal or Royal Arms button. These were turned out in enormous quantities : indeed, all the manufacturers concentrated upon their production, and it is estimated that at one time the different manufacturers must have been making at least 30,000 gross a week. That means over four and a quarter millions of buttons a week : a prodigious number, but not in a sense abnormal when we consider the number of soldiers we had in the field, and the multiplicity of buttons used on the uniform of every combatant. Naturally there is a check upon the talk of those who know most about

this phase of the trade, but, if all that some of the manufacturers have in their minds could be put into type, well, the revelations would be adjudged to be amazing. Of course, there was over-production, but that was possibly inevitable, for the manufacturers practically had *carte blanche* to make buttons as they liked, and after all no one could accurately forecast the end of the struggle. But it was a busy time for the Birmingham button trade, and those who are best fitted to speak in regard to what happened say that everyone worked with feverish enthusiasm, for after all a uniform is of little value without buttons. Therefore it was without doubt essential work upon which the members of the trade were engaged. It practically came to this : that the whole of the firms in the trade were turning out military buttons night and day. And the leading Government officials acknowledged the wonderful way in which the trade responded to the calls made upon it.

The old livery or crest buttons practically died out during the time of war. Naturally most people had given up their carriages and motors for mere pleasure : but, since 1920, the crest livery buttons have come back into fashion, and are being used upon the livery of chauffeurs as well as coachmen. And now the Government are reviving the old regimental buttons : buttons of which those entitled to wear them are ever proud. There is nothing inspiring in a button which is common to the whole army, but to the soldier the special button sacred to his regiment is something over which he may pardonably wax sentimental. The old military buttons were magnificently made. The writer remembers all the slow and methodically careful operations : the mere attaching of the shank was something which required the utilization of flux and a blow-pipe. Now the shanking of a button is scarcely a process, so rapidly is it done.



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**TURNING OR FACING MACHINE FOR PEARL, ERINOID, ETC.**

It is stimulating to think that the modest button has provided Birmingham with an industry of vast proportions. The trade originally established itself in the Midland City and it has never left it. Competition from other towns has scarcely been serious, strange though that may seem. There is still a whole range of firms devoted to the making of the pearl button, another Birmingham speciality from the earliest times. Indeed, the pearl button makers have their own trade association, and would deeply resent any insinuation that the glories of the trade had departed from Birmingham.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE AMERICAN BUTTON INDUSTRY

ALTHOUGH the manufacture of buttons in the United States began before 1810, no statistics of their history appear until the census reports of 1850 ; at any rate up to that point they were not dealt with separately, but were merged in general reports. In 1850 there were 59 really substantial button-making establishments in the United States ; in 1860 there were 43 but by 1870 the number had risen to 64, and in 1888 to 124. In 1890 the number was 106, but in 1900 the number of responsible firms was given as 238.

In 1850 the cost of materials was \$324,837, while in 1900 it had risen to \$2,803,246, or nearly nine times as great. The value of production in 1850 was \$964,359, in 1900 it was \$7,695,910. Now while the increases are very substantial, and reflect the increase in the value of production, they do not indicate the real growth in the quantity of productive manufacture, in that greatly improved methods of production had considerably reduced the prices of the goods turned out. Indeed, there was a decrease in the average capital of the establishments.

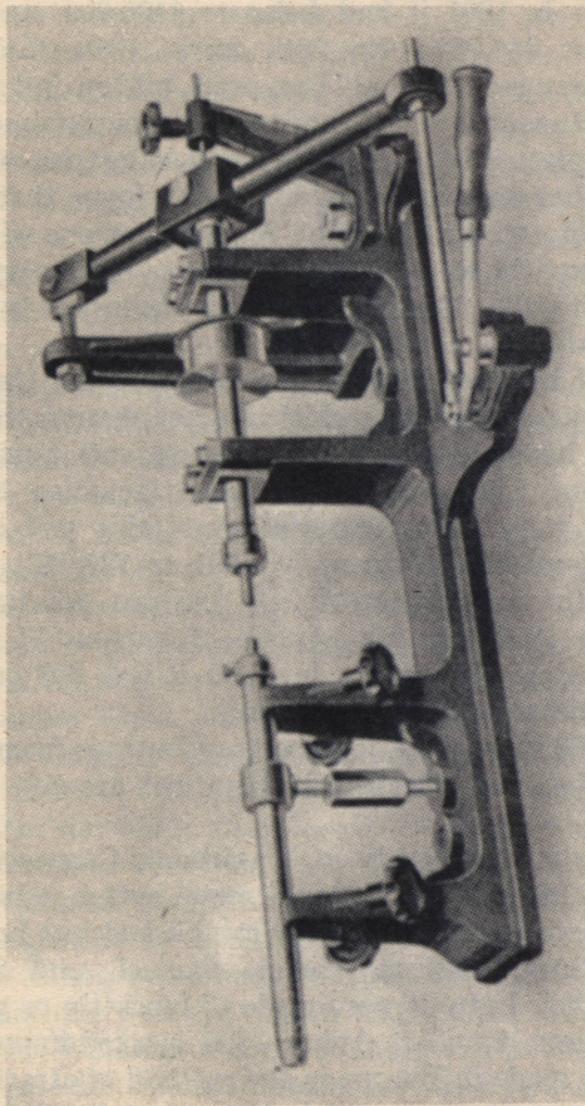
Quite a remarkable trade sprang into existence in the United States since 1890 in consequence of the demand for fresh-water pearl button blanks. By the way, in 1890 button-manufacturing was established in nine States and one territory, but in 1900 the industry flourished in nineteen States, Iowa coming first with 53 firms, whereas there was none there ten years before ; New Jersey had 17 ; New York 15, and Illinois 10. In

1890 the mother-of-pearl (ocean pearl) shells worked up totalled 1,748,856 lb., while of the fresh-water mussel shells 4,830,112 lb. were used, and of vegetable ivory 12,382,720 lb., the average cost per lb. being 35.5 cents for the mother-of-pearl ; 4.9 cents for the fresh-water mussel shells and 2.2 cents for the vegetable ivory. The vegetable ivory and the mother-of-pearl used were imported into the United States, and in 1900 the importations consisted of 16,036,389 lb. vegetable ivory, while shells to the value of \$1,016,228 were imported. In this year no fewer than 5,432,246 gross of fresh-water pearl button blanks were produced.

The total production of buttons in 1900 was—

|                                    |           |       |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-------|
| Bone.....                          | 297,180   | gross |
| Cloth .....                        | 1,372,870 | "     |
| Composition .....                  | 2,407,319 | "     |
| Horn .....                         | 717,047   | "     |
| Metal .....                        | 4,759,671 | "     |
| (of which 3,713,144 were of brass) |           |       |
| Pearl—fresh-water .....            | 4,308,584 | "     |
| Pearl—ocean.....                   | 4,049,452 | "     |
| Vegetable ivory .....              | 2,661,823 | "     |
| Wood .....                         | 78,200    | "     |
| Celluloid .....                    | 105,086   | "     |
| Paper and other materials .....    | 496,786   | "     |

The importation of pearl buttons, which before 1891 had constituted the largest section of such imports, had almost ceased in 1900. On 30th December, 1887, the Consul-General of the United States reported : "The manufacture of pearl buttons is not an industry of the United States, and probably never will be. The reason for this is quite obvious : pearl buttons cannot be manufactured by machinery ; owing to the brittle state of the raw material these must be made by hand. As this hand labour is remunerated at the low rate of £2 to £2 8s. Od. per week, the competition of the American labourer is out of the question."



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**BLANKING OR DISC CUTTING MACHINE FOR PEARL, ERINOID, ETC.**

The declared value of pearl buttons exported from Austria to the United States during the year 1886 was \$1,681,747 ; in 1891 it had fallen to \$100,001, and in 1900 it was \$36,262. On 29th April, 1898, Consul-General Hirst reported : "The pearl button industry of Austro-Hungary, which, in former years, occupied a prominent place among the flourishing industries of the Monarchy, has dwindled of late to such a figure that the pearl button can no longer be regarded as one of the principal exports to the United States. This may be attributed to the development of the industry in the United States."

The chief kinds of buttons imported into the United States are agate buttons, which are not manufactured there, the higher grade of collar and cuff buttons, ivory buttons, and button coverings, including linen hanks and tufts. The importation of this last class decreased from 599,848 gross in 1891 to 122,959 gross in 1900 ; the importation of silk buttons practically ceased. In 1886 the importation of buttons of that type reached 55,583 gross ; in 1900 it was 805 gross, showing a decrease of 98.6 per cent.

Up to 1860 there were no exports of buttons from the United States, but considerable quantities are now sent abroad.

The first button factory in Waterbury, Connecticut, now one of the chief centres of the metal button industry of which there is any record, was established just before 1800 by three brothers, Henry, Samuel, and Silas Grilley. Their buttons were made of block tin or pewter in cast-iron moulds. About 1800 marked improvements were made in Europe in the method of attaching the shanks or eyes to metal buttons, and in 1802 the firm of Abel Porter & Company came into being for the manufacture of metal buttons in Waterbury. We

are told that it took this concern eighteen months to get started, and when its operations began it employed thirteen men, four of whom were actual members of the firm. The copper was obtained by purchasing old stills, tea-kettles, etc., which were cast into ingots, and taken to an iron mill in Bradleyville to be converted into sheets : these were afterwards finished at the button factory on a pair of rollers 2 ins. wide, driven by horse-power. The capital of the company had been exhausted during the various experimental stages and the concern soon changed hands, but practically no progress was made until 1820, when an Englishman named James Croft, who had a complete knowledge of the business, came on the scene, and from that point the metal button industry in Waterbury made very rapid headway.

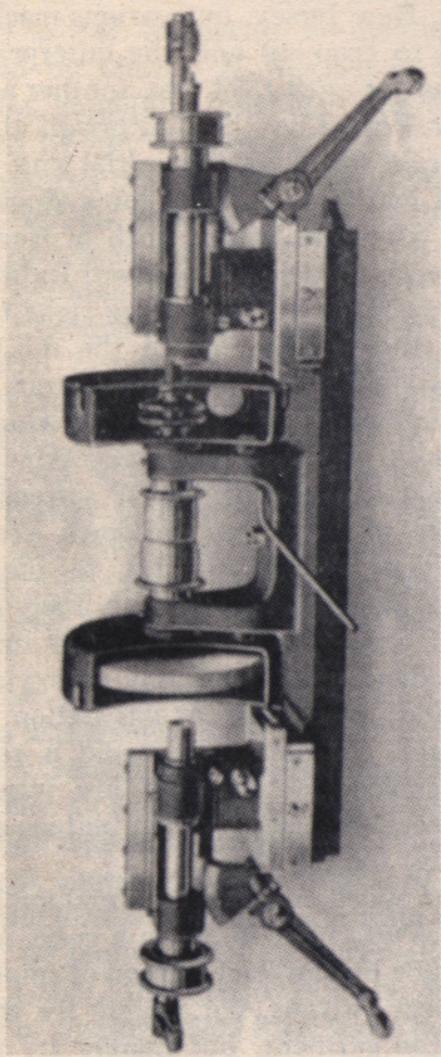
We are told by the compilers of the United States Census of Production that originally flat buttons were sold, and struck out of blanks from a thick plate. The shank was soldered on afterwards, and the whole was finished by gilding or silvering. Then came the application of Mr. Sanders' principle in making metal buttons : the upper blank was driven by heavy pressure into a die of hardened steel, which gave it the desired shape and pattern ; the under blank was similarly pressed in another die which also riveted the shank into the plate. The two dies were then pressed together, and the button was complete except for the finishing, which process was accomplished by electro-plating.

No attempt was made to manufacture covered buttons by machinery in the United States until 1827, when one Samuel Williston was the founder of the industry. He and his wife covered buttons by hand in their home at East Hampton, Massachusetts. Gradually machinery was introduced and the business grew until, in the year 1834, he threw in his lot with Joel and Josiah Hayden

of Haydenville, with the idea of improving the machines. At first they met with scant success, but later, with the aid of Francis Stanley, who had had practical association with button makers in England, they succeeded in producing thoroughly efficient machines. Labour and time-saving machinery has constantly been introduced since, and to-day practically the whole of the work is done by automatic machines. At the present time practically all the lastings and other apparatus necessary to cover buttons are produced in the United States, but up to 1892 they were imported from Europe.

To Aaron Benedict is due the credit for starting the manufacture of ivory and horn buttons in Waterbury. He came on the scene about 1821, and his raw material was, in the main, hoofs of cattle. The desired pattern was stamped upon them under a hydraulic press, and automatic machines were used for boring holes and polishing.

Then the vegetable ivory button industry came into the United States in 1859, an Englishman, A. W. Critchlow, starting their manufacture at Leeds, Massachusetts. The raw material is provided by the seed of the fruit known as *Phytelaphas Macrocarpa*, a South American palm, which is mainly shipped from Colon, Columbia. The seed is commonly known as the ivory nut, and is about the size of a hen's egg ; the albumen is very close grained, and exceptionally hard, and bears a distinct resemblance in texture and colour to the very finest ivory. This vegetable ivory is especially adapted to the application of colours. As a matter of fact the methods of production of vegetable ivory buttons have changed comparatively little since they were introduced into America, but very remarkable progress has been made in other directions, notably in the dyeing of



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BACKING MACHINE FOR PEARL, ERINOID, ETC.

the buttons, and a finish is obtained which cannot be excelled in Great Britain.

In 1862 efforts were made to produce composition buttons in Newark, New Jersey, but various mechanical difficulties seemed to crop up and the enterprise was abandoned. It was not until 1874 that another attempt was made in New York City, but, although this was somewhat more successful than the initial one, it was abandoned after it had been running for a single year. However, in 1875, a certain Isaac Smith of New York came into contact with the Dickenson Hard Rubber Co., of Springfield, Massachusetts, and getting right to grips with the problem they conquered all the mechanical difficulties, and produced composition buttons which were completely successful. These buttons, which very much resemble those produced from vegetable ivory, are made from plastic material which softens easily under the influence of heat, but becomes extremely hard when cold. The ingredients are, in the main, fossil and vegetable gums, combined with finely ground carbonate of lime, felspar, mica, or similar minerals. These various ingredients are thoroughly mixed in semi-heated grinders, and, when the amalgamation of the minerals and gums is complete, the liquid is run into sheets and then cooled. When they are wanted in strip form these sheets are placed on hot platens and the strips are soon ready for the dies.

A very important epoch in the button-making history of the United States was in 1875, when a great impetus was given to the trade by the then fashion of smothering ladies' garments with buttons, not merely for the purpose of fastening the garment, but mainly for that of ornamentation. The demands made upon the trade were such that they could not possibly be met, and, as everyone might imagine, this state of things appealed

strongly to an inventive nation such as the United States, and a series of epoch-making inventions followed. Some of these were specially interesting, notably that for the use of templates in making dies. This was patented by Charles R. Wickes in 1877, while a pin-plate for moulding buttons with holes was jointly invented by Mr. Wickes and Mr. P. H. Sylvester, and they patented this in 1878. Before this it had been the custom for all holes to be bored by hand, after the button had been moulded. Then in 1880 came the era of the hydraulic press, and in 1882 came the first real step in the direction of composition buttons, when the automatic button machine was invented, also by Mr. Sylvester. Needless to say, the use of this machine resulted in an immense increase in the production of buttons and a considerable cheapening of their cost. Mr. Sylvester also invented an improved method of mixing and preparing the plastic material. This was in 1900, and very soon Pennsylvania and New York boasted two of the largest button factories in the whole world.

Another interesting phase of the button industry in America was the production of celluloid buttons. These were very beautifully produced and, later still, the photo button had an extraordinary vogue in the States. Their production was on an almost incalculable scale ; indeed one might legitimately say that their utilization was a rage. Buttons were also made from potatoes, and it is asserted by one writer, in a work called *The Dictionary of Dry Goods*, that buttons made from potatoes can scarcely be distinguished from those made of ivory, horn, or bone ; quite a careful examination is necessary before the difference can be detected. Then, of course, buttons made from casein, or skimmed milk, were introduced after they had become the vogue in London, but for a

time their manufacture hung fire. It is worthy of note that buttons made from blood have also been marketed in the United States, while at one time they were produced from a peculiar brown seaweed called *Limnaria*. Indeed, so thoroughly did America devote itself to the button industry that, from the establishment of the United States Patent Office until the year 1900 no fewer than 348 patents were granted for button-making machinery, and 1,355 for processes in button manufacture.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE PEARL BUTTON INDUSTRY IN THE STATES

A SPECIAL note is obligatory in regard to the manufacture of pearl buttons in the United States. As has been said, these were produced from mother-of-pearl, and also from shells which were found in the Mississippi River. It was not until 1855 that the trade in mother-of-pearl buttons was introduced into America. Then, and for a long time afterwards, the shells came mainly from China, but, later, South Australia and the South Sea Islands constituted the chief source of supply. The trade name for buttons produced from mother-of-pearl is ocean pearl, while those made from fresh-water mussels are styled fresh-water pearl buttons. All the higher quality of pearl buttons still have to be produced from the ocean shells, and their production constitutes a very large percentage of the total output of buttons in the United States.

As late as 1890 there was not a single fresh-water pearl button produced in America, and yet ten years later their production ranked as the second most important section of the button industry. But, as a matter of fact, in Europe shells of mussels taken from rivers have long been utilized for button manufacturing. It was to Mr. J. F. Boepple, of Muscatine, Iowa, that the honour of initiating the industry into America was due, and it very soon found employment for thousands of people. Mr. Boepple, who was a native of Hamburg, learned the method of making pearl buttons before he left Germany, and he it was who was shrewd enough to find in what are known as the *Unio* or *nigger-head* shells wonderful

natural material, and there was practically an inexhaustible supply of these in the Mississippi. Indeed, it was no unusual thing to see banks of them extending for miles along the margin of the river. For a time the experiment did not succeed, and the business was ultimately dissolved, as he was unable to trade at a profit, but Mr. Boepple was not to be daunted, and he continued to make the buttons on a very limited scale in his own home. Finally he succeeded in establishing a company which, by the aid of machinery similar to that used in Germany, produced a successful method of manufacture, and the company he organized turned out quite a financial success. As a matter of fact, the manufacture of shell buttons is quite simple: they are turned on lathes, and we are told that it was not long before the River Mississippi was lined with button manufactories all the way from Redwing in Minnesota to Louisiana in Missouri, and Muscatine became the real centre of this remarkably flourishing industry. At one time there were no fewer than 140 factories in Muscatine solely engaged in the cutting out of blanks for the manufacture of buttons. But the inevitable tendency was for manufacture to be concentrated, and gradually the trade drifted into the hands of the more powerful concerns.

A very important factor in the progress of this fresh-water button industry lay in the difference in price between the ocean shell and the fresh-water mussel. Some years ago these mussel shells could be delivered at the factories at about 50 to 60 cents for 100 lbs., while the price for a similar quantity of ocean shells was anything from \$30 to \$60. By February, 1898, the price of these nigger-heads had gone up to £18 to £20 a ton, but in the latter part of the same year they were cheaper than they had ever been before, the price not exceeding 30 cents for 100 lbs.

Of course, there are certain grades of comparatively cheap ocean shells, one of which is the Panama, which at one time had a value of  $10\frac{1}{2}$  cents per lb. It is on record that the improvements in machinery in recent years have been so extraordinarily rapid, that some of the American manufacturers are credited with having changed their machines three times in the same number of years, their entire plant being practically equipped each time.

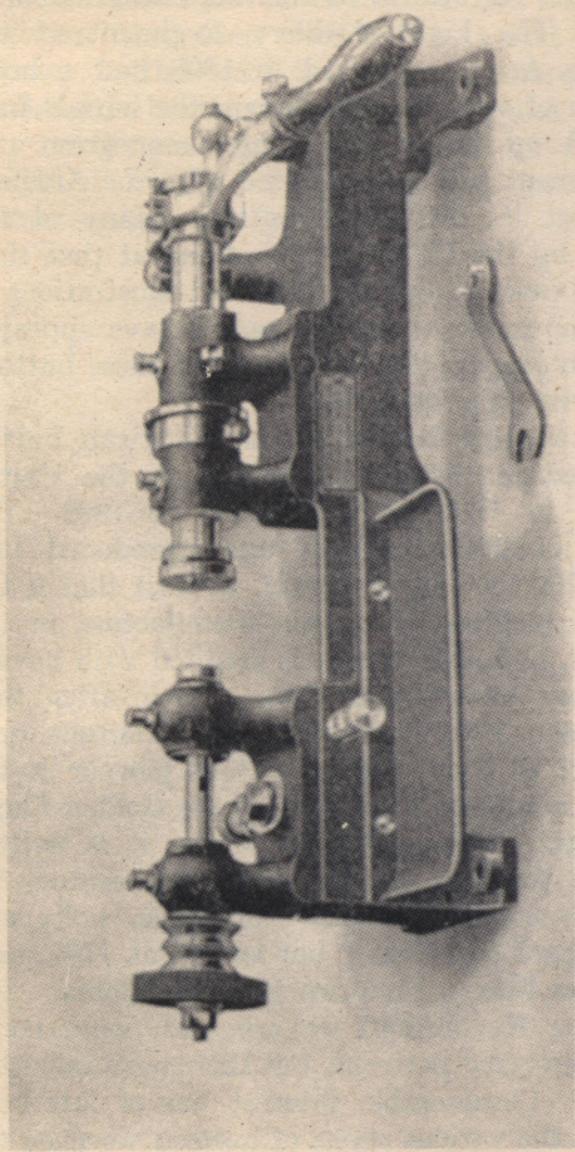
The following may be accepted as the basis of the manufacture of these buttons. After the mussels have been cooked and the meat removed, the shells are taken to the factory and stored in sheds. They are then sorted into three different sizes, and soaked in barrels of water for three, four, or even six days in order that they may be rendered less brittle. They must be used while wet, as otherwise they crumble up under the tool. They are next cut or sawn into rough blanks ; the shells are usually held with pliers while being cut, but sometimes they are held in the hand. The saws are hollow cylindrical pieces of steel 2 ins. wide, with a diameter corresponding to the size of the button. At one end these cylinders are provided with fine teeth and are adjusted to lathes in which they revolve. The sawer holds the shell against the saw, blanks are cut out and drop into a receiver : they are then pressed and ground on the back of the blank to remove the skin and produce an even surface. In order to accomplish this, each blank has to be held against a revolving emery wheel : then comes the turning, by which the front of the button receives its form, including the central depression. When the holes are drilled, the button is complete with the exception of the polishing, and this brings out the natural lustre which was lost in the grinding. It is this lustre which gives the buttons their

chief value. The polishing is done by placing the buttons in bulk in large wooden tumblers or kegs, in which they are subject to the action of a chemical fluid. As the tumblers rapidly revolve, by mutual contact combined with the effect of the fluid, the buttons become highly lustrous ; then they are washed, dried, and sorted into sizes and grades of quality, and then, after being sewn on cards or packed in paste-board boxes, they are ready for the market.

The majority of factories in the West do not produce the buttons, but merely cut out the blanks ; these are sent to the Eastern factories, where the latest machinery is installed. Formerly most of these Eastern factories used to make buttons out of imported mother-of-pearl shells, but now they are mainly engaged in producing them from the home-grown mussels.

As long ago as 1900 the American Census of Industry was deplored the waste and depredation of the shell deposits, and said that that was the only disquieting circumstance in connection with the trade. The beds in front of Muscatine were then already exhausted, and the prophecy was made that, unless something was done to protect the mussels, it would not be long before the raw materials for this industry were exhausted.

After the War of the Revolution the infantry of the United States Army used a small coat button made of brass, until the year 1800, when the various regiments were required to have their special number impressed on the face of the button : from 1778 until the close of the second war with Great Britain the uniform button for the Artillery represented an unlimbered field-piece raised upon brass or gilt, with a small guidon flag fastened by its staff to the right side of the trail of the gun carriage. A button of this kind was found at Constitution Island. From 1815 to 1821 the uniform



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**DRILLING MACHINE FOR PEARL, ERINOID, HORN, BONE, ETC.**

coat buttons of the Artillery Corps of the United States Army were of brass or gilt, with the word "*Artillery*" after the eagle. A button of this kind was found at West Point. The Light Artillery Regiment of the United States Army, organized in 1808, had a brass or gilt button of very fanciful design, the initials L.A. being worked up in an ornamental monogram. In 1841 the regiment was consolidated with the Artillery Corps and lost its distinctive button. Many of the buttons used by the United States Army at that time were made of pewter, and the fact that illustrations of certain buttons found at various points have appeared would seem to suggest that the record of these buttons would otherwise have been lost.

A very interesting review of the American button trade appeared in the twelfth census of the United States taken in 1900 and published in 1902. The manufacture of brass buttons was introduced into America in 1750 by Caspar Wistar, at least that is the first recorded mention of button manufacture in the United States, although Wistar is credited with having produced them before that date. Soon after that Henry Witeman started making metal buttons near the Flymarket in New York. A third pioneer of the industry was Benjamin Randolph, at the Golden Eagle, Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, of whom it is written that towards the end of the eighteenth century he manufactured wooden buttons "of apple, holly, and laurel wood, hard and clear," but as late as 1797 there were only two button factories in Philadelphia. The soldiers of the Revolution, we are told, wore metal buttons of prescribed patterns, but these were imported from France. Considerable interest has of late been manifested in the various styles of buttons worn by the various regiments raised for the war with the Mother

Country, and a very interesting article appeared on the subject in the *Magazine of American History* in 1883. Apparently many of these buttons had been completely forgotten until they were found at odd times on the various battlefields. Some very interesting George Washington buttons are reproduced, and they are of a very striking design, while some of the regiments composed wholly of farmers had buttons of most interesting types.



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